

契

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A Promise of Romance

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宮城とおこ

秋津京子

June

Yaoi



Novel

Edward took one of Satsuki's hands, which were covered by long lace gloves, and placed a kiss on the back of it.

"Satsuki, you are truly beautiful."

Every girl has dreamt of it at least once in her life... a handsome prince, astride a magnificent steed, coming to scoop her up and ride with her into the sunset.

Edward, an English nobleman, is every bit the handsome prince – except he doesn't have a damsel in distress. After finding out his late father's will stipulates that Edward must be married by the time he reaches age 26 or risk losing control of the family estate and fortune, Edward's relatives have been trying to arrange a marriage for him. Rebellious against his family's wishes, Edward sets off to find himself a wife of his own choosing. But instead, he finds Satsuki – a young, Japanese exchange student attending theater classes at the local college. Of course there's a catch: Satsuki is a boy!

On a friend's suggestion, Edward and Satsuki enter into a contract. Satsuki will cross-dress and agree to a sham marriage with Edward. In exchange, Edward will pay Satsuki for his acting services, shutting his snooty relatives up and allowing him to keep control of the family fortune. Everybody's happy, right? Except for one small thing – what happens when the pair actually fall in love?

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A Promise of Romance

契約—ブランドロマンス

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Birthday: February 25th-Pisces

The three biggest events that happened while writing this book: Beckham cut his hair, His Royal Highness Prince Alexander visited Japan, and Prince William started to look like his father...

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I haven't had any time to hit the sales, and now winter's almost over...What's wrong with my life?

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Act I

The Tempest

The faint odor of alcohol reached the butler's nose as soon as he entered his master's chamber. He frowned.

The curtains were pulled shut, and the flames flickering in the fireplace served as the room's only illumination, despite the bright morning sun shining outside.

The faint firelight fell upon the master's canopied bed, which was empty. The butler noticed a figure lying on the couch that was set before the fire.

A bottle of brandy lay at its feet.

"Master Edward, have you been drinking again?" the butler asked the man sprawled out on the couch. "If you keep up these habits, it will simply be a matter of time before you descend into true alcoholism."

"I didn't call you in here to lecture me, old man."

A young man sat up on the couch and lazily ran his fingers through the golden hair tousled on his forehead.

This was Edward, the young master of the estate.

The butler ignored his protest and drew open the curtains. Morning light flooded the room.

A huge garden spread out beyond the window, grand enough to require the hard work of 30 groundskeepers to maintain it. It was the middle of winter now and the landscape was brutally punctuated by evergreens. But while a profusion of flowers covered it in the spring, the garden was remarkably beautiful and remained so all the way through autumn.

Edward had sloppily wrapped a dressing gown over his pajamas. The red showing through the corners of his eyes proved that he was still drunk. The line of his jaw was perfect and his nose straight, his thin eyebrows arched intelligently over his blue eyes, clear as a sparkling summer lake. The word "noble" seemed to exist only so that it could describe him.

The young master turned to gaze meaningfully at the side table, frowning. The butler found himself following his master's eyes. An opened envelope lay atop the table.

"Bring me that letter," Edward ordered.

"You can do that much yourself, sir," the butler retorted, flatly refusing the order. Despite his servant's status, he was proud to have served Edward in the role of a parent for many years. He would not serve his master blindly.

Edward smirked at the butler's response.

"I suppose you think I'm taking advantage of you," he said.

"It's the alcohol that's making you demand such ridiculous things," the butler shot back.

Edward shrugged and reached toward the table. He took a photograph from the envelope and held it up for the butler to see. It was a picture of a young woman.

"Do you know who this is, old man?" he demanded.

Trying not to reveal the shock he felt, the butler replied as calmly as he could, "She's quite an attractive young lady. Does she come from a good family?"

Edward opened the letter. "It's from a friend," he said conversationally. "He wrote something very interesting here. I think you should hear it."

And he began to read:

"Dear Edward,

I'm writing to you to confirm some gossip I've heard in certain circles. The name of the person you see in the enclosed photograph is Lady Margaret, the daughter of Earl Simon. She's now 19 years old."

"I'm afraid I don't see what's so interesting—," the butler began.

"It's this next part," Edward interrupted, continuing his reading. "She's to be engaged to Lord Argyle in May of this year. Everyone is talking about how there will be an extravagant wedding ceremony and the two will become society's leading couple within the year. There are only about 200 people in England with the title of lord, so when I heard the name Argyle, I thought of you, Edward. I would like very much to get the details from you."

It was currently February, three months before the supposed engagement.

"You're just being difficult, Master Edward.

“Didn’t you know all about it?” the butler blurted out. He must have thought it best to keep the matter a secret until now.

“I just found out!” Edward yelled back. “Now I’m completely sober again. And I don’t remember agreeing to any such thing, I assure you.”

In a naked display of anger, he tore the letter up and hurled it into the fire. The flames burned it to ash in seconds.

“That may well be, you never recall any of the things we discuss,” the butler said dryly.

Edward was speechless at the butler’s easy admission of his involvement in the plot.

The butler continued. “I didn’t expect you to accept the idea quietly simply because we had discussed it, so I kept it hidden from you.”

“Well I’m sorry I spoiled your plan,” Edward said sarcastically. “Thankfully, I have friends who keep me informed.”

The image of a man with chestnut-brown hair floated into the butler’s mind. The man showed up from time to time at the manor, a friend of bad influence from Edward’s school days. His name was Neville, a reporter for a third-rate newspaper.

“But aren’t you forgetting something important, Master Edward? According to your father’s will, if you are not married by your 26th birthday, the entire estate, including the fortune, will be transferred to your cousin, Master Gordon.”

Edward’s parents had died in an automobile accident when he was 20, and he had inherited the title

of Lord from his father. Like the former British Empire which had ruled the world, the English aristocracy in the 20th century had nearly collapsed, surrendering its territories abroad to property and estate taxes. But during that time, generations of Argyles had invested their vast estates, founded a company, and steadily increased their fortunes. After his parents’ death, his father’s will left the company in the hands of relatives, an indication of the old man’s uneasiness over Edward’s behavior. There was also the provision that if Edward didn’t marry by the time he was 26, the entire fortune would be transferred to his cousin.

“I don’t have any interest in managing the company,” Edward said stubbornly. “Everyone’s done exactly what they’ve wanted to do up till now, so why should the future be any different?”

“Are you sure about what you’re saying?” the butler asked incredulously. “Master Edward, all the time you’ve been throwing your money around, have you ever earned any yourself? You could never live as a poor man.”

“Gordon is a good man, he would support me,” Edward insisted.

“What are you saying?” the butler asked. “Is that what you want? Your father drove himself mad over you. His will is his last message to you, telling you to start taking on the responsibilities of a nobleman—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, old man, but...” Edward held out his right hand in front of the butler, the white and elegant hand of a born aristocrat. On the middle finger rested a ring that cradled a clear blue

stone. It was a family heirloom, a blue diamond passed down from generation to generation. He calmly pulled the ring off and tossed it to the old man.

Desperate to keep it from hitting the floor, the butler caught the ring and then went pale. "This...this is a forgery!" he gasped. "What's happened to the real one? Please tell me you haven't lost it!"

"I gave it to some woman two years ago," Edward said, almost negligently.

"I trust you know what that means," the butler choked.

"Yeah, just one of this family's stupid traditions," Edward answered, bored. "When the ring that's been handed down for generations is given away, it signals my imminent engagement."

"Who did you give it to?" the butler inquired.

"A young woman living in the bad part of London," Edward announced.

He might have simply given it to a girl selling flowers in the street. It was not beyond him.

The old man became despondent. But this was no time to give up.

"It's just as you say, Master Edward," he said. "No one would blame you for putting an end to a tradition that's past its time. So you can still marry the Lady Margaret."

Edward sneered and turned away.

"Master Edward!"

The young master sighed. "Relax, old man. I'll get married, just as my father wanted. But I'm not marrying some aristocrat's daughter whose only interest



is philanthropy. I'll choose my partner myself."

"Master Edward, that will never do," the butler remarked.

"Why not?" Edward demanded.

"The girl's family has already accepted the offer," the butler confessed.

"We'll pretend we didn't hear back," Edward growled.

"Master Edward!"

Looking tired, Edward again held up a hand to cut the old man off. He turned his blue eyes away and did not look at the butler again.

Unwilling to sully the master's mood any further, the butler remained silent.

"Anyway, prepare my things for an immediate departure," Edward finally said.

"Where will you be going, sir?" the butler inquired.

Edward smiled cheerfully. "London. I'm going to find my fiancée."

A year and a half had passed in the blink of an eye since Satsuki Imamura had come to London.

He had spent the first year in English language courses, but now, he was pursuing his true purpose: studying at an acting school. He could now easily handle daily conversations, but when people began running off at the mouth and speaking quickly, the language still escaped him.

Satsuki had been active in the drama club the

whole time he was in high school, and had dreamed of going to a famous acting school after graduating with his best friend, Yohei Aida.

He and Yohei had met in high school. The class seating arrangement had put Yohei in front of Satsuki. He had been the one to teach Yohei everything the other boy knew about theater. It was only because of Satsuki that Yohei became interested in the subject. But despite that, Yohei had applied himself and had gotten ahead of Satsuki.

Satsuki had thought he was better than Yohei at everything—better at school, better at acting, everything. But only Yohei had been accepted to their dream school.

"I can't believe I got accepted!" Yohei had announced gleefully.

Satsuki would never forget the look on Yohei's face, the way his eyes had shone when he came over to tell Satsuki the good news at school.

"I wasn't sure I'd make it," Yohei had gushed. "You were a shoo-in. Here's to another four years together!"

The possibility that Satsuki might not have gotten in hadn't seem to ever enter his mind.

"Well, I messed up," Satsuki had owned up. He had rallied all the muscles in his face, trying to muster a cheerful smile, but it failed miserably.

Yohei had looked utterly dumbfounded.
"What?"

"I didn't get in," Satsuki had clarified.

Even acting had its limits. Though he had tried

to pull his face into the perfect smile, a single tear had escaped and run down his cheek.

Yohei had looked perplexed for a moment, then laughed, perhaps thinking that Satsuki was joking with him.

It was humiliating.

"Is it that funny that I didn't get in?" Satsuki had shouted at Yohei before storming out of the room.

Even he had thought it was a childish way to act. Whenever he remembered that day, Satsuki's face would go crimson with shame.

Talent determines an actor's place in the theater world. Satsuki understood that. He'd thought he'd done well on the entrance exams. But the fact that he had failed the practical section devastated him. The number of people who can support themselves by acting is so small, it's almost nonexistent, even for those who graduate from special training schools. Satsuki hadn't felt arrogant assuming that he was one of those chosen few. His unrivalled love for theater had given him a sense of confidence. But there's a certain spark to good acting that had been lacking in him, and he hadn't been accepted by the best school. And during that dark time, he'd thought he would never be a professional, either.

Satsuki had ended up graduating without ever speaking to Yohei again. He'd also gone to his fall-back school. Of course, he'd enrolled in the theater department. But it was nothing like the school he had wanted to go to, which had a reputation of turning out huge numbers of professional actors. All the other students in his new school had applied to that same

school, and all had failed to get in. All the classes and everyone in them had an air of failure. Then there had been the students who were genuinely satisfied with their lot and had never hoped for anything better—Satsuki couldn't stand them, either. Still, he hadn't felt like taking the exams over again. His pride wouldn't allow Yohei to be his senior.

But Satsuki had never been happy with his life at the college he never wanted to attend. Then one day, he'd discovered a book. It was a collection of essays by a famous theater actor who had studied drama in London.

"I'll go to London, too!"

By the time he'd finished the book, his heart was set on studying in England, the birthplace of theater. After all, even if he graduated with a theater degree, that didn't guarantee him a job. It would be much more useful to learn English while he took all the theater classes he liked.

He had now realized his dream.

The only real problem was money.

Not wanting to be a burden, he had cut himself off from his parents' support and fled Japan. But his money had evaporated during his first year at the language school in England. So it would be impossible to ask them to help pay his school fees now.

He was now managing to keep himself fed with a part-time job in a pub. But he was still in danger of dropping out because he couldn't afford to pay the tuition. And if he did ask his parents for help, they would probably just send him the money for a plane ticket home.

But his life here was just beginning. He couldn't go back to Japan yet.

Satsuki went straight to work after his classes were over. The pub's owner was a typically brusque Englishman of few words. He glanced at Satsuki's face and silently set a plate of food out for him.

The menu was standard working-class fare: fried fish and chips. Satsuki had gotten a bit tired of it, but he was in no position to demand luxury. He ate in a corner of the pub, then went behind the bar. He would be working non-stop from now until midnight.

The pub was filled with the lively energy of laborers returning home from work.

Satsuki's main duty was washing dishes behind the bar.

It was physically exhausting to work a part-time job after the demands of acting all day in classes, but he had so much fun listening to the rapid-fire conversations around him, the one thing that made his job enjoyable. And sometimes, the customers would treat him to a beer.

When he had finished washing the first batch of dishes, he glanced up at the end of the bar. That was where Brenda, a regular customer, usually sat.

In the course of his many conversations with her, he had been shocked to discover that Brenda was only 10 years older than him. He had been sure she was nearly the same age as his mother. And even accounting for the idea that Westerners aged more quickly than

the Japanese, and the fact that his mother looked remarkably young for her age, he still couldn't believe how young Brenda was.

Apparently, she was not living a very comfortable life, dressed in second-hand out-of-fashion clothes. She would always order one beer and nurse it preciously before going home. She had told him that her parents died early and she had lived alone ever since. But that shouldn't have made her life so wretched. Never without a friendly smile for him, Brenda always worried about Satsuki's well-being, since he had come all the way to England all alone. She had also been the one to negotiate with the pub owner to include meals in his pay. She was unusual among English people, who were usually stand-offish and reluctant to interfere in other people's business.

But Brenda hadn't been by the pub in several days.

He remembered that she had been coughing constantly the last time he had seen her, and he started to worry.

"I guess she's really sick."

"If you ever need anything, you can come see me," she had told him once. With no relatives in England, her words had struck Satsuki's heart, which was already strained by loneliness.

It must be difficult for her to manage by herself if she's sick and all alone.

Satsuki decided to go see her.

Walking down a squalid side street in a bad part of the city in the bitter cold, Satsuki finally spotted the apartment he was looking for. The building was very old. It looked like it had been built long before Satsuki was born. The inside was dim, and smelled of mold and dust. He lacked the courage to take the elevator, which looked like it might collapse at any moment, and climbed up the creaking staircase to Brenda's room on the third floor. He couldn't find a doorbell anywhere, so he knocked on the door hesitantly.

There was no answer.

He knocked louder.

"Quit that racket!" a voice yelled from inside.

The door swung open violently and a woman wearing garish makeup appeared, causing Satsuki to scream.

He was in a complete panic from the shock of screaming at a stranger. He struggled to think of something to say.

"I-I'm sorry," he managed to stutter. "Um, I'm a friend of Brenda's."

The woman looked at Satsuki angrily, pointedly inspecting him from top to bottom. "Are you a customer?"

Satsuki nodded.

"We haven't got anything worth stealing," the woman said, speaking roughly in a thick, low-class accent that Satsuki had trouble understanding. "The door's open, so you don't have to knock all politely like that. Just come in."

With that, she went back inside.

Unable to leave after having come this far, Satsuki fearfully edged into the room.

Empty liquor bottles and discarded clothes were scattered everywhere, and the entire room was in disarray. The woman at the door was wrapped in a shawl and inhaling deeply from a cigarette.

The room was unheated and was literally freezing cold. The heater must have been broken. It was almost the same temperature indoors as out, and Satsuki couldn't bear to take off his down jacket.

"Brenda's room is over there." The woman jerked her chin in the direction of one of the doors.

Apparently, Brenda shared her apartment with at least one other person, maybe more.

Satsuki opened the door the woman had showed him.

There was no real difference in temperature here, either. There wasn't even a light on. By the light coming in from the main room, he could just barely make out the shape of Brenda's body lying on her bed.

"Is that you, May?" Brenda's voice came feebly back to him.

May was the nickname that had been born when Satsuki explained that his name was the old Japanese word for that month. "Satsuki" was difficult for the people here to pronounce, and so he had begun using the name May at school as well.

Brenda tried to sit up. "What are you doing here? Do you need help?"

Her cheeks were drawn and hollow, anyone could tell that she was wasting away quickly. Satsuki looked away.

"I'm fine," he said. "But I noticed you haven't been coming to the pub these past few days. How are you? Did you see a doctor?"

"It's a fitting end to my life that I die here," she replied hoarsely.

"Brenda?" Satsuki gasped.

"I'm glad you came, May. There's something I want you to keep for me." Brenda slid a hand under her pillow and pulled out a thin chain. "It's something I never want my roommates to see."

She gave the chain to Satsuki. At first glance, it looked like a necklace, but looking closer, Satsuki saw that instead of a pendant, the chain held a ring with a transparent blue stone.

"God appeared before me two years ago and gave me that," Brenda whispered reverently.

"God?" Satsuki echoed.

"Yes," Brenda answered. "Up till then, my life had been nothing, but suffering. My mother abandoned me right after I was born. Did you know that? And my father was a drunkard. When I was little, he would sell me to people for drinking money. He finally died when I was 17, and I was free. But I'd never really been to school, so I didn't know how to survive except by selling my body."

Satsuki couldn't believe his ears. The story Brenda was feverishly telling him was incomprehensible compared to his peaceful upbringing in Japan.

"But God didn't abandon me," Brenda continued. "He gave me this ring as a reward for

surviving. He told me it would sell for a lot of money. He was so beautiful, it was like waking from a nightmare to see his golden hair. I recognized him right away. He was God. So I told him, 'I can't sell your ring. I'll treasure it forever. So please come see me again.' And now, there's something I want you to do, May."

"What is it?" Satsuki asked.

"I want you to give his ring back for me. If he comes to the pub where you work, please—" Brenda was cut off by a coughing fit.

"Brenda!" Satsuki cried out.

Her coughing showed no signs of stopping. And they were not ordinary coughs. They were throat-raking coughs, like bronchitis. When his older brother had had a cough like this when they were children, it was due to asthma. Every time the asthma flared up, he was hospitalized and their mother would leave Satsuki behind to go with his brother. Satsuki was still very young at the time, and he had been jealous of his brother monopolizing their mother.

Brenda's roommate came at the sound of the coughing.

"I'm calling an ambulance this time, Brenda!" she yelled. "We don't want you infecting us with something serious."

Brenda didn't answer and only coughed painfully.

"Hey kid, you can't stay here forever," the woman snapped. "It's getting late, so you hurry on home now. I'll see what I can do for her."

The woman spoke quickly so Satsuki had no choice, but to leave.

"Remember...May..." Brenda moaned painfully.

Seeing her like this upset Satsuki. He nodded firmly, hoping to comfort her. A look of relief came across her face.

The woman peered suspiciously at Satsuki. With great reluctance, he left the apartment.

That would be the last time he ever saw Brenda.

Neville entered a wealthy housing district in London, summoned there by his friend. Even here, the most striking building was the five-story apartment his friend owned.

In this building, each floor had three independent apartments. Each apartment cost more than Neville would ever earn in his entire lifetime. His friend, on the other hand, was staying on the top floor. The man had combined the three apartments into one. What's more, he had bought the apartments on the floors below so that he wouldn't be disturbed by his neighbors. That was why Neville could see no lights illuminating the other four floors from the outside. His friend also owned a massive estate and manor house on the outskirts of London. He had inherited all of it from his parents. He had never had to work for anything; his position made everything available to him.

Neville, who had nothing, was very jealous of

the wealth his friend had inherited. But he had never wanted to trade places with him because Neville knew that even though his friend was young, and his position and wealth gave him everything he wanted, the man was not happy.

Neville had first met his friend Edward at the boarding school.

England is still a strongly class-based society. Neville's working-class parents had not welcomed the news that he had been accepted to a boarding school. They believed that any education beyond the requirement was unfitting to their position, and that working-class people should lead working-class lives. Neville had earned the money to pay for the school and teachers spoke to his parents on his behalf, and so he had been finally allowed to attend. But all the other children had come from positions of privilege. Whenever Neville spoke, his classmates would mock his lower-class accent. Even the teachers smirked when Neville said something.

Edward had been in a completely opposite position. Even in their school, he had been special. He was the heir to a corporation with offices around the world, and would one day inherit his father's title and incredible fortune. There had always been a crowd of people around him, and he'd always shone in their center.

On one side, the favorite son of a born aristocrat, and on the other, a working-class kid whose name was as good as mud. When they first met, Neville would never have dreamed that Edward would treat him kindly.

Edward had been the one to cultivate the friendship. Clear blue eyes below shining golden hair, he had truly been like an angel.

Neville remembered being terrified at having to respond to his perfect Queen's English pronunciation. His lower-class accent had come out stronger than ever.

But Edward hadn't laughed at him like the other students. He had been the picture-perfect honor student. And he had loathed his surroundings, which loved him too easily.

Neville greeted the doorman at the entrance and rode the elevator to the top floor. This was practically his second home. Opening the door with his spare key, Neville headed into the sitting room, expecting to see his friend.

Edward was sprawled indifferently on the sofa. His silk shirt was unbuttoned, revealing the bare skin of his chest. When he saw Neville out of the corner of his eye, he raised the wine glass in his right hand apathetically.

"You're pretty late, aren't you?" he greeted. "I was getting tired of waiting."

Neville could tell Edward was in a bad mood.

"So what else is new?"

Since graduating, it had been more exceptional to see Edward in a good mood than otherwise.

"I didn't think you'd get to London this quickly," Neville explained.

"It's all because of that letter of

yours," Edward growled.

Neville grinned toothily. "Sure snapped you out of your boredom out there in the country, didn't it?"

"Thanks, yes," Edward said sarcastically. "It was all exactly as you'd said."

"Don't you think it's time you gave up and got married, Edward?" Neville asked, concern evident in his voice.

His friend shrugged his shoulders dismissively, his face sulky. "Don't be ridiculous. Who would I marry? None of the girls in the right families interest me. I'm doing enough just living out the life that's been set out for me."

"That's a pretty constructive opinion for you," Neville remarked.

"Constructive?" A confused expression clouded Edward's face for a moment, but then he began to laugh softly. "Neville, I just had the most wonderful idea."

"Let me say something first," Neville interrupted. "I really do think it's best if you get married like your father's will says."

If Edward continued this idle lifestyle, it would ultimately destroy his body and his spirit. If he were to marry, he could lead a healthier life. That was why he had to marry. But the truth was, these words didn't express Neville's true feelings.

"Never mind that," Edward said dismissively. "Just listen. I *will* get married. But it'll be a sham. I'll marry someone, get my inheritance once and for all, and then kiss my 'wife' goodbye."

"Do you think that would work?" Neville asked

dubiously. "Most women are pretty greedy. Do you think you can find a woman who'll just give up being Lady Argyle voluntarily?"

"I know of such a woman," Edward assured him. "About two years ago, I became acquainted with a very nice woman. Her horrible situation in life moved me to give her my family's heirloom ring."

"You don't mean the blue diamond?" Neville asked incredulously.

He had rarely been surprised by anything Edward had done in all the time that he'd known him, but now he was at a loss. There were only a handful of such treasures in the world. He couldn't comprehend simply giving the ring to a stranger.

"She said she wouldn't sell it," Edward drawled, "though its price would have supported her for the rest of her life. She only said she wanted to see me again. Isn't that an unselfish woman? I'm sure she would be willing to help."

"Maybe she didn't know how much the ring was worth?" Neville guessed.

"Who cares?" Edward said. "I'm going to find her. If she still has the ring, she'll be my fake bride."

"And what if she did sell it after all?" Neville asked.

"I'll buy it back and find another woman," Edward answered.

Neville pushed on. "Do you think you can find another one that easy?"

"What would be so much easier is if you were a woman, Neville," Edward joked.

Neville stared at his friend. "I think it'd be better if *you* were a woman. You'd be much easier to deal with."

Edward laughed boisterously. He thought his friend was kidding.

"Well, I'm not going to set him straight," Neville thought.

"I'm sorry to spring this on you, but I'd like you to come with me," Edward said after his laughter had subsided.

"I'm at your service, my lord," Neville mocked.

His friend frowned at him.

Satsuki had no idea what to do with the ring Brenda had entrusted to him.

There was a huge, transparent blue stone set into it. The setting was silver of amazingly fine workmanship. Satsuki knew almost nothing about jewels, but even he could appreciate how expensive the ring must have been.

He felt that if he were to wear it while walking around outside, someone would steal his entire finger to get it. He couldn't leave it in his room, either, for fear of robbers. For the last three days, he had worn the chain in his belt loops and kept the ring in his pocket. He felt most secure when it was with him. Even so, he was worried. He had rashly agreed to return the ring to its owner, but it was a daunting task.

"Maybe I should go give it back to Brenda."

He was afraid of seeing the woman who lived with Brenda again, but he couldn't keep the ring forever. So he decided to go over after work.

Satsuki was washing dishes behind the bar as he always did when the door opened and a customer came in. He looked up, hoping that it might be Brenda. Lately, he had gotten into the habit of checking every time a customer came in.

It wasn't Brenda—just two men. But Satsuki couldn't stop staring at one of them.

The first thing he noticed was the glossy blond hair. Then he saw the smooth face, white and sculpted like marble. That, and his slender height, made the man look like a movie star who had just stepped through the screen. He was wrapped in a tailored long coat of supple fabric whose expensive price range was obvious at first sight. He was unmistakably unlike the rest of the customers.

Since coming to London, Satsuki had realized that there were hardly any of the stylish foreigners walking around the streets that he had seen in magazines and on TV. The Europeans in the media were different.

"Maybe he's a model. Or maybe..."

Satsuki ran through all the British actors he knew in his mind, but none of them matched.

"If I had to guess, I'd say he looks like Beckham before he cut his hair."

Something about the man resembled the famous soccer player.

The man took off his coat. Beneath it, he was

wearing a silk shirt that faintly reflected the dim light. He approached the bar and ordered a straight scotch. Most customers ordered ale, a British style of beer. Scotch was unusual, and a straight scotch even more so. He emptied the shot glass in a single swallow, as if he was drinking water, and casually ordered another.

Satsuki stared at him in amazement. His rough drinking style didn't fit with the fashionable way he was dressed. He knocked back the second glass like it was water, too.

Suddenly, the man's eyes met Satsuki's. Startled, Satsuki froze in the middle of washing a dish.

The man's eyes were the same shade of blue as the stone in the ring Brenda had given him. He gave Satsuki a friendly smile. Maybe he realized that Satsuki had been staring at him.

Satsuki felt his pulse quicken with embarrassment.

Ignoring his discomfort, the man waved Satsuki over.

"Yes sir?" Satsuki asked timidly.

"I believe a woman named Brenda comes to this pub regularly," the man said. "Do you know her?"

Satsuki marveled at the beautifully accented English the man spoke.

British people speak differently depending on their social class. Japanese people can't usually tell the difference, but when English people speak to each other, they can tell in five minutes what a person's class is and where they were from. Satsuki lived and worked in working-class areas, and his school was

full of middle-class students who weren't particularly wealthy. This man was unlike anyone else Satsuki had encountered.

Satsuki had never met a member of the upper class. In this country where the class system still thrived, everyone knew their place and rarely invaded the territory of the other classes. But then, if the man was part of the upper class, he wouldn't have come to a place like this.

"Brenda's been sick. She hasn't been by lately," Satsuki answered honestly.

"I hope she comes back," the man's chestnut-haired companion said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Me, too." The blond man nodded then turned back to Satsuki. "Can you give Brenda a message for me?"

"Of course," Satsuki promptly replied.

"I'm trying to locate a ring and would like to get in touch with her," the man said.

He took a silver business card holder from the inner pocket of his jacket and handed one to Satsuki, along with a tip. Then, finishing the rest of the scotch in his glass, he stood up to go. Each move he made looked as if it had come straight from a movie. The impression he gave was unlike that of other people.

"God gave it to me."

Satsuki recalled the story Brenda had told him.

"He was so beautiful it was like waking from a nightmare to see his golden hair. I recognized him right away. He was God."

Was this man the 'god' from Brenda's story?

He looked at the business card. The title "lord" appeared before the man's name indicating his noble status. Satsuki had no idea how Brenda knew a nobleman, but that wasn't going to stop him from telling her that her 'god' had come looking for her. Besides, the tip the man had given him was far too large for simply passing on a message.

Once work was over, Satsuki went back to Brenda's apartment. This time, he knocked on the door gently so that the other woman wouldn't yell at him again. When he turned the knob, he discovered that the door wasn't locked and it simply swung open.

He felt odd entering the house without saying anything, so he whispered "excuse me" to himself in Japanese.

When he went into the living room, he saw a woman, different from the one he had met before, wearing almost nothing and with her feet up on a chair, giving herself a pedicure.

She raised her head and looked at Satsuki suspiciously.

"What's a kid like you doing here?" she demanded.

"I came to see Brenda," Satsuki said, faltering.

"Brenda? Oh, she died three days ago," the woman said indifferently.

"Died?" Satsuki echoed dumbly.

"Yeah," the woman confirmed.

"But I saw her here last week," Satsuki sputtered.

He could hear the flirtatious voices of a man and woman in Brenda's room. Seized by an uncontrollable impulse, Satsuki ran to the room and threw the door open.

"Who's that?" a voice growled.

"Some kid is spying on us!" another voice cried out.

Two strangers were tangled together on the bed, yelling at Satsuki's intrusion. In a moment, his face and ears were burning. He took a step back, did an about face, then ran out of the building as fast as his legs would carry him.

How long did he run? He didn't even know where he was or how he'd gotten there. Panting, he finally came to a stop.

He finally understood the sort of place Brenda's apartment was. Her roommates all earned their living by selling their bodies. He understood now why Brenda hadn't wanted them to see the ring. They were the sort of people who would use her room to do their business just days after she'd died. If they saw her ring, they would run out to sell it as fast as they could.

After running randomly through an unfamiliar area at night, Satsuki was completely lost. He called a taxi.

London taxis are the best in the world—just give them an address and they'll take you straight to where you're going.

Satsuki showed the driver the business card the

blond man had given him. He ended up in a high-end residential area near Regency Park. He paid the fare with the tip money, but there was still a lot left over in change.

As he got out of the taxi, Satsuki gasped at the luxurious apartment building that rose up before him. The entrance was glowing with lights and a uniformed doorman stood next to it.

He briefly hesitated, but he couldn't give up now. He gathered up all his courage and showed the business card to the doorman.

"Straight to the fifth floor," the doorman said after calling up to the room. He pointed to the elevator inside.

"Thank you," Satsuki said, feigning nonchalance, and stepped into the lavish building.

He passed through an immaculate lobby enclosed by marble walls. Inside, the building was more like a luxury hotel. Even though people would be walking through the room in outdoor shoes, thick, luxurious carpets were spread across every inch of the floor. A giant chandelier hung from the high ceiling, giving off a radiant light. Here and there, vases as tall as people decorated the room, showing off stunning arrangements of fresh flowers.

Satsuki got into the elevator and pushed the button for the fifth floor.

He was overwhelmed by the feeling that he didn't belong there. But he had accepted the blond man's tip, and so he had to deliver the message that Brenda was dead. There was also the matter of the ring.

The chances were good that this man was the ring's proper owner.

The elevator doors opened. There was a single deeply carved door standing at the end of the hall. Satsuki pressed the doorbell beside it, and the door opened a few moments later. But it wasn't the blond man standing in the doorway, it was his chestnut-haired friend.

"You're the kid from the pub. What do you want?" the man asked, eyeing Satsuki suspiciously.

Satsuki hadn't noticed in the pub, but this man was in his own category of beauty. Below his chestnut dark hair glinted toffee brown eyes. But the blond man's charisma was so overwhelming that, beside him, his friend's individual charms were smothered.

"I came to tell you that Brenda's passed away," Satsuki said. "I just found out myself. And she gave me something before she died."

He wasn't sure if the man knew what was going on, but he took the ring from his pocket and held it up.

The man's eyes widened and he looked from Satsuki to the ring and back again.

"Did you know that this is the heirloom of Lord Argyle's family?" he asked.

"It's a lord's heirloom?" Satsuki questioned back, repeating the unfamiliar words.

"Yes, it is," the man said. After some hesitation, he added, "You'd better come in."

It would be difficult to call the man's tone inviting.

"Does he think I'm here to scam them?"

Satsuki was annoyed, but he'd come this far, he couldn't give up now. He nodded and followed the man into the apartment.

The main room was spacious and had a high ceiling like the lobby. But in contrast to the lobby's brilliance, this room was dark and bleak. They passed through a number of deserted rooms before finally reaching one with a person in it.

A double bed had been placed in the room, and it seemed by all appearances to be a bedroom. The blond man Satsuki had seen in the pub was sprawled out on a sofa, a glass of light brown liquid drooping in his hand.

"Edward, you have a visitor," the chestnut-haired man said to the blond.

"Well now, it's the cute girl from the pub." Without getting up, the blond man named Edward turned his gaze on Satsuki and smiled. He moved languorously and an air of decadence clung to him.

"Actually, I'm not a girl. I'm a boy," Satsuki corrected him hastily.

Because of his name, he was often mistaken for a girl, even in Japan. That didn't seem to have changed since coming to England, but it was more humiliating to be mistaken for a girl because of his face rather than his name.

Edward stared at him. Apparently he didn't believe Satsuki.

"Sorry," he said after a short pause.

Perhaps noticing Satsuki's annoyance, Edward

tossed in a smile with his apology.

Satsuki felt as if Edward was making a fool of him and grew even more upset, but reminding himself that he hadn't come here to pick fights, he tried to calm down. He wasn't at all used to being provoked.

"You see, what happened is..." And he told Edward what had happened to bring him there and showed the man the ring.

Edward's laughter interrupted him unexpectedly.

"You hear that, Neville?" he merrily said. "My plan's failed pretty quickly."

Satsuki sensed something offensive in Edward's manner. The man seemed to be mocking Brenda's death.

"I'm not surprised," the chestnut-haired man named Neville replied glumly.

"Well, if the ring belongs to you, I'll give it back," Satsuki said. "Otherwise, I'll take it to the police."

He wanted to get out of this place as soon as he could. His patience had limits. Neville hadn't seemed very welcoming with his guarded manner, and Edward didn't seem to be the kind of person Satsuki wanted to be around with. Besides which, so much had happened already that he was just worn out.

"Oh, it's definitely mine," Edward assured him. "I gave it to Brenda two years ago."

Satsuki held the ring out to him. "Then I'll give it back to you."

Edward grabbed Satsuki's extended hand and

slipped the ring onto a finger. Satsuki was confused.

"This ring is the heirloom of my family."

Ignoring Satsuki's reaction, Edward told him the same story Neville had given him earlier. "When we give this ring away, it's only to our intended brides. By the way, are you Chinese?"

"I'm Japanese," Satsuki answered.

"Did you come to London to sightsee?"

Edward asked.

"No, I'm studying here, at a theater school," Satsuki explained.

"Theater?" Edward echoed, delighted. "Really? And your name?"

"Imamura Satsuki."

Satsuki deliberately gave his full name in the Japanese order. Most British people weren't used to Japanese names and couldn't remember them very well after only hearing them once. He wasn't going to be nice and spell his name out for this arrogant man.

"Is Imamurasatsuki your first name?" Edward asked.

Satsuki relented a little. No one in London had ever pronounced his name so well.

"Imamura is my family name. Satsuki is my first name."

"Satsuki," Edward murmured. "What a wonderfully exotic name. And Asians are so attractive. Don't you think so, Neville?"

He showed no sign of releasing Satsuki's hand. All Neville did was shrug.

"Excuse me," Satsuki uttered.

He was starting to feel a little trapped. No one had ever held his hand for so long. When he tried to casually pull his hand away, Edward tightened his grip. The man was smiling, seemingly enjoying himself.

Was he laughing at Satsuki's discomfort? Satsuki got even angrier at the thought. But it wouldn't be very adult-like to lose his temper right after meeting someone, so he pulled himself together.

"How would you like to be my fiancée?" Edward suddenly asked.

The question baffled Satsuki.

"Your fiancée?" he asked.

He was beginning to lose confidence in his English skills. He had no idea what Edward was saying.

"As it happens," Edward explained, "I'm being forced to marry someone I have no interest in whatsoever, and so to avoid that, I'm looking for a *fake* fiancée. You said that you're enrolled in a theater school?"

Satsuki nodded. "Yes."

"So then you're good at acting," Edward reasoned out. "How about it? I'll pay you 300 pounds a day to pretend to be my fiancée. I think that's pretty good."

"Good idea," Neville chimed in. "This kid would look great dressed up like a girl." He laughed so hard he had to hold his stomach.

"Wait a minute," Satsuki protested. "I'm a boy. And why do you need to make up a fake fiancée? I'm sure you could find a lot of eligible women."

Edward smiled ruefully.

"I don't think that would work."

"Most women wouldn't stop at just pretending to be a fiancée for a rich, handsome aristocrat," Neville explained.

Edward sighed wearily. "We were planning to ask Brenda. She was a prostitute, after all. She would have understood her position."

Satsuki felt the blood rising to his face. How pathetic Brenda seemed now, thinking of him as her God! Edward wasn't just being dismissive, he was insulting her.

"I can't do it," Satsuki said coldly. "Please find someone else." He yanked his hand free, pulled the ring off, and set it on a table. "I've returned your ring now, so I'm going home."

He couldn't hide the sharp tone in his voice.

"You seem to be upset," Edward said coolly. "Let me take you home, as an apology."

"No, thank you!" Satsuki replied immediately.

Edward's rudeness might have been an example of that British conversational technique called "wit," but it had gone too far.

Satsuki wanted no further part in this conversation. He had already formed a bad opinion of Edward.

"He might look good, but he's got a rotten personality."

Edward smiled winningly. "Don't be shy."

Satsuki really wanted to say no. But, in the end, he wound up being taken home in Edward's car. The main reason was that he didn't know how to get home.

And it would have been impossible to find a taxi in the middle of the night in a residential neighborhood.

The only bright spot was that Edward had been drunk, and so Neville drove Satsuki home. This man with the chestnut-hair was a bit of a mystery himself, but compared to Edward, he seemed perfectly normal.

"Do you feel a little calmer?" Neville asked as he drove. "He doesn't mean any harm. Just remember he was drunk and forgot all about it."

"Brenda wanted to see him very badly. But the things he said..." Satsuki broke off. He couldn't help complaining.

"What was your name again?" Neville asked.

"Satsuki. It means 'May' in Japanese, so everyone calls me that instead."

"May, then. I'm Neville Oakley. I work for a third-rate tabloid paper."

"You're a journalist?" Satsuki asked.

Neville nodded, then fell silent.

The car sped through the night.

Outside the window, Satsuki saw that all of the stores were closed and no one walked the streets of the city as it slumbered. Neville seemed to be focused entirely on driving and showed no inclination to chat, and so Satsuki fell silent, too. They arrived at Satsuki's building without ever resuming the conversation.

When he climbed out of the car, Satsuki dug out what remained of the tip from his pocket.

"Would you please give this money back for me?" he requested.

"Why?" Neville wanted to know.

"There's no reason for me to keep it," Satsuki pointed out.

"You're pretty honest, aren't you?" Neville remarked. "I don't think he cares about the money, though."

"I care about it," Satsuki insisted. "I only used some of it to pay for the taxi to his place."

"All right." Neville accepted the money. "I just have one piece of advice for you, since you're so sincere. Don't get mixed up with him."

"Well, I don't think I'll be seeing him again," Satsuki threw back.

"Let's hope so," Neville said ambiguously and then left.

When he reached the boarding house, Satsuki went straight to his room and fell into his bed.

So much had happened today.

He had worked hard all day at school then gone straight to his job at the pub. That alone would have worn him out. But in the deepest part of the night, he had witnessed first the very lowest and then the very highest levels of London society.

And Brenda was dead.

Their parting had been so sudden that he couldn't process it at all.

He couldn't even visit her grave because he didn't know where it was. And he never wanted to go back to her apartment again.

When he shut his eyes, an image of Edward's

handsome face floated up in his mind.

If all he had known was Edward's appearance, the man would have been perfect. And he was a real aristocrat. Meeting him would be good for a story when Satsuki went back to Japan.

"Though I'll probably never see him again," Satsuki told himself.

Act II

The Taming Of The Shrew

"May! May! Wake up!"

Satsuki didn't realize he was being spoken to at first. When he jerked himself awake, all of his classmates were looking at him and laughing.

They were in the middle of Authentic Movements Class, which involved everyone closing their eyes and moving freely to the music the teacher played.

The second Satsuki closed his eyes, he'd fallen asleep.

His classes had been getting harder and harder lately since the school was preparing for the end-of-semester performance. In addition to their usual classes, students had to attend rehearsals for the play. He was beginning to approach his physical limits working at the pub while attending classes. But if he quit the job, he would be forced to quit school, too.

"The best thing would be to take a break from school and get a better job so I could earn more money, then come back."

He realized that he was seriously considering Edward's offer. 300 pounds was about 60,000 yen; more than 600 dollars a day. He could earn more than

his month's pay at the pub just by dressing up as a woman.

And it wouldn't be the first time that he had dressed as a woman, either. For his first two years in high school, the older students had forced him to play the women's roles every time they did a play. He hadn't wanted to do it, but everyone had said that he was prettier than a real girl. In his third year, he had assumed the presidency of the drama club. He had been relieved to escape the women's costumes by becoming the best.

But, considering his present circumstances, he could hardly be blamed. And he had to admit that this offer would probably make the best story of all when he got back to Japan.

The final spur in changing Satsuki's mind came unexpectedly—Edward came to the pub.

Even in the crowded bar, Edward stood out immediately. He was dressed casually in a moss green designer shirt and beige slacks, but even so, he looked like a model from a magazine.

Holding a straight scotch in one hand, he came up to Satsuki, smiling.

"When do you get off work?" he asked.

"10:00 p.m.," Satsuki answered, a bit bewildered.

"Let's go on a date after," the blond suggested.

"A date?" Satsuki echoed, even more bewildered.

Edward nodded. "Yeah."

Satsuki tried desperately to recall the meaning of

the word. A date was usually when two lovers decided on a day and time to meet. Was there some other meaning?

For example, in Japan, when someone says "Let's have tea," it means just that. But in England, the meaning of words changes depending on the social class of the speaker. People in middle-class and above understand "Let's have tea" to mean the obvious, "Let's drink tea," like in Japan. But for the working-class it means going out to dinner. When Satsuki had been invited to tea by an English friend, he hadn't been sure if they meant actual tea or dinner.

So maybe there was another meaning to the word "date" that Satsuki didn't know. Or was Edward making a joke? Unable to reach a decision, he simply agreed. When he was done with work, he left the bar with Edward.

"Actually, I haven't eaten dinner yet," Edward remarked. "Have you?"

"I only ate a little bit before work," Satsuki replied. He wasn't lying. It had been six hours since he'd eaten.

"Do you want to go back to my place for dinner?" Edward offered.

Satsuki nodded. He could never get to sleep on an empty stomach. He wasn't going to turn down an opportunity for food. And he would be lying if he said he wasn't interested in eating dinner at a nobleman's house.

They hailed a cab at Piccadilly Circus and headed for Edward's apartment.

The spacious room was, as always, devoid of

the signs of life. It was like a ruin.

"Where's Mr. Oakley?" Satsuki asked.

"He's got a lot of work," Edward explained. "Apparently, he can't spend all his time with me."

"Lord Argyle—" Satsuki stopped as he tried to say Edward's name. The name on the card Edward had given him was far too long and Satsuki wasn't sure what to call him.

"There's no need for formalities, call me Edward," the blond said, noticing Satsuki's distress.

"Do you live here all alone...Edward?" Satsuki inquired.

"Yeah," Edward replied.

"I thought aristocrats had more servants," Satsuki commented.

"There are enough back at my estate to make you sick," Edward said.

"You have another house besides this?" Satsuki asked.

Edward laughed. "In Dorsett, which is a wasteland."

Satsuki stared.

Edward's blue eyes, like glittering glass, were fixed in his deeply carved face. He moved strangely. He didn't seem human.

Satsuki understood a little better why Brenda had called the man a god.

"I'll be right back," Edward said suddenly. He disappeared, leaving Satsuki in the sitting room.

Satsuki looked around. The room was poorly lit for its size, and so the whole place was dim. Framed

paintings decorated the walls. Satsuki's knowledge of art was limited, but he recognized a Chagall piece among them. It was probably real. And all of the furniture looked like antiques of some value. He almost felt as if he had wandered into an art museum by mistake.

Edward reappeared after a while.

"Dinner's ready," he announced. "Come into the dining room."

The large table was covered with a white table cloth and a candle burned in a silver candlestick, which was set in the center of the table. The ambiance was exceptional.

But the selection spread out on the table was limited—only spaghetti with meat sauce and wine. Satsuki wasn't sure if he should comment on the unexpected simplicity of the meal or not. He chose to ignore it.

"*Itadakimasu*," he said in Japanese and picked up his fork.

"What was that?" Edward asked, making a strange face.

"It's something Japanese people say before they eat," Satsuki explained.

"*Itadakimasu*, then," Edward cheerfully parroted Satsuki's pronunciation.

Satsuki couldn't say why, but hearing a blond foreigner speaking Japanese was a bizarre feeling.

The spaghetti wasn't good enough to compliment. The noodles were too soft and the sauce tasted like it had come out of a can. But the wine was extraordinary.

Glancing at the label, Satsuki saw that it was quite old. He regretted having drunk it so quickly. He would probably never taste anything so sophisticated again in his whole life.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Edward said when the meal was over. "There's nothing quite as dull as eating alone." After he'd reached adulthood, he had never eaten with any of his school friends except Neville.

"Everyone's busy with their work except me. I don't have a job. But they don't have time to come see me," he confessed almost shyly.

It wasn't a lack of jobs that kept him from working, though. Rather, there was no need for him to work thanks to the inheritance from his parents.

Probably due to the effects of the wine, Satsuki was in high spirits and talked with Edward about his school days, about Japan, and about a thousand other things. He thought that his English must have been very stilted, and he had difficulty understanding Edward's stories, but the blond seemed very interested and listened attentively.

The man was acting completely different from the first time they'd met. He was being a true gentleman.

"Can I invite you back sometime?" he asked. Satsuki nodded.

Edward smiled, looking truly glad. He had obviously been really bored before.

Satsuki wanted to leave in time to catch the last subway train. His host insisted on seeing him off at the

nearest station, and they ended up walking there together.

It was the coldest part of February. They sobered up immediately, and fell into a natural silence.

Satsuki didn't feel that he could broach the subject of the job.

Edward bought Satsuki's subway ticket when they reached the station.

The subject of the job hadn't come up once during their dinner. Satsuki worried that maybe Edward had already found somebody else.

"By the way, that thing you mentioned last time...I'm willing to try it," he said impulsively as they were about to part.

But maybe the whole thing had been a joke. As a flood of worries rushed through Satsuki's mind, Edward embraced him.

"That's wonderful," the blond man whispered.

"Uh." Satsuki wasn't used to being hugged in public. It was some small comfort that there was no one in the station this late at night. Otherwise, he probably would have shoved Edward away from sheer embarrassment.

"I'm so glad that you're accepting my offer," Edward said. He took off the blue diamond ring from his ring finger. "Take this," he continued, slipping the ring on Satsuki's finger solemnly. Then he stooped over and gently placed a kiss on the back of Satsuki's hand.

It was like a scene in a play.

Satsuki felt his face blushing bright red.

He really would never get used to British humor. Satsuki's phone rang almost the moment he got home. It was Edward.

"Did you make it home all right?" the man inquired.

"Yeah," he replied.

"I'm glad to hear it," Edward said.

After all his time living alone in a foreign country, hearing those words warmed Satsuki's heart.

"Would you like to have dinner again tomorrow?" Edward asked.

Satsuki accepted the invitation graciously. Tomorrow was Friday and, without school the day after, it would be a good opportunity to test his new job.

"I'll leave early from work," he promised.

Besides, Satsuki was impatient to hear the details of the job offer, so why would he refuse?

Satsuki decided to skip work the next day, and went straight to Edward's apartment after school. The doorman remembered him and let him in directly. He passed through the hotel-like lobby and went up to the fifth floor.

Edward appeared, smiling brightly. "There you are!" he exclaimed.

He led Satsuki to the sitting room and offered his visitor a drink. Satsuki asked for a beer, afraid that if he asked for wine he would be served something outrageously expensive again. Edward had been drinking brandy before Satsuki arrived.



"Neville called a little while ago and said he'll be here shortly," the blond said. "Once he gets here, we'll all go to a Chinese restaurant."

Satsuki remembered Neville's admonition to not get involved with Edward and felt a little uncomfortable.

"Should I really go along when a friend of yours is coming to see you?" he wanted to know.

"Of course," Edward replied. "He's an old friend. There's no need to worry about formalities with him."

Satsuki had no choice but to acquiesce.

"Oh, do you have the ring?" Edward asked, taking Satsuki's hand.

"I keep it in my pocket." Satsuki hastily pulled out the chain with the ring on it. "I'd like to give it back to you, actually. I'm afraid I might lose it."

"Is it too big for you?" Edward inquired. "I'll get it adjusted."

He seemed not to have heard Satsuki at all.

"Do I have to wear it?" Satsuki asked.

"Of course. Whenever you're in public." Edward laughed. "It's the symbol of a fiancée of the Argyle family."

Satsuki felt dizzy. But he wasn't about to give up now. Edward didn't seem to be as horrible as he'd thought, but the man was definitely strange.

Neville arrived after this exchange.

For a moment, he looked surprised to see Satsuki, but he quickly recovered his ironic smile. "So you got involved with him after all," he said. "You

must really like him, May."

"Satsuki's going to be playing Eliza from 'My Fair Lady,' and I'll be Professor Higgins," Edward declared. "I suppose that makes you Colonel Pickering."

He seemed to be truly enjoying himself.

Audrey Hepburn, the pixie of the silver screen, starred in the movie "My Fair Lady" and it became one of her most famous films. She played a flower seller in Covent Garden who became a refined lady under the guidance of Professor Higgins, a linguist.

"Well, if we're re-enacting the movie, how about a little wager, Professor?" Neville said, getting carried away, too. "Eliza had six months to become a lady, but how long do you have, May?"

Edward shrugged. "Six months is a walk in the park. We have three months to break up the old man's scheme before the engagement party."

"You're telling me that May will be standing by your side at the engagement party at Hyde Park hotel in Knightsbridge in three months?" Neville asked incredulously.

"What exactly do I have to do?" Satsuki butted in.

"All you have to do is be my fiancée," Edward said. "That's not hard. Oh yes. As we discussed before, you'll be paid 300 pounds a day. I'll start today. I'll also pay a clothing allowance to get yourself set up, so don't worry about that."

"Wait just a minute!" Satsuki cried out. "Do you know how many days there are between now and

May? And I won't be able to pay you back if it doesn't work out."

"May is right," Neville said. "Making up a contract would be better for both of you."

His words reassured Satsuki. There were some things that Edward couldn't really understand, but Neville was a journalist and had common sense.

"All right," Edward conceded. "We can arrange it tomorrow. Even though I'd be happy to take Satsuki to Dorsett today if it meant I could stop the old man."

"Don't be so hasty," Neville said. "I think May is in shock."

"I'm going to be relying on your help, Neville," Edward said seriously. Then the mischievous glint returned to his eyes. "Or should I say, Colonel Pickering?"

His friend shrugged. "Anyway, the thing to do now is have dinner. We can work out the plan later."

No one contradicted this.

Even in England, where the food is reputed to be so bad, relatively good Chinese food can be gotten at expensive restaurants—places Satsuki could only dream about in his penniless state. The three ate a good deal before leaving the restaurant.

The next morning, Satsuki was woken up by a call from Edward. The contract had been drawn up, and the man wanted Satsuki to come as soon as he could. The blond sounded unusually excited.

The clock said it was only 8:00 am. Satsuki

would have liked to sleep in since there was no school, but once he was up, he could never go back to sleep. He gave up and got out of bed to get dressed. Then he took the subway to Edward's apartment. The man appeared when he pressed the bell outside the door on the fifth floor.

"Come in, Satsuki." Edward put a hand on Satsuki's shoulders and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

It was a common gesture in England, not just between lovers. But Satsuki was not at all used to it. But, as if demanding a kiss in return, Edward presented his own cheek to Satsuki, and he was forced to comply.

Entering the sitting room, he saw Neville lying on the sofa. The man was wearing the same clothes as last night—he must have stayed the night.

"Neville, Satsuki's here," Edward said, rousing him.

"Here so soon?" Neville stretched as he sat up. "I'd like a cup of coffee. Where's the maid?"

"It's her day off," Edward explained. "I suppose I'll have to make it myself." He disappeared into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Satsuki greeted Neville, supposing there was no need to kiss and embrace him.

"He must have forced you to come here this early," the man remarked.

Satsuki nodded.

"The upper-class is used to issuing orders," the man added. "They don't think about the trouble involved for everyone else."

"It certainly seems that way," Satsuki agreed.

"If you want out, now's the time to say so." A meaningful smile crossed Neville's face.

"You tried to stop me before, too," Satsuki said.
"Why?"

The man shrugged. "Because you're going to become a plaything for the rich."

"But I need money," Satsuki said. "This is all very well-timed for me."

"Then there's nothing I can do," Neville remarked.

"Nothing you can do about what?" Edward asked as he reappeared.

"I was asking May if he was ready for this." Neville stood up and brought over a bundle of papers from a table. "This is your contract."

"It's pretty thick," Satsuki commented.

He had been the one to ask for clarification, but now that the job was becoming real, he was getting a little intimidated.

"It's just for reassurance. We didn't get an actual lawyer to make it," Neville said, spreading open the document.

Satsuki picked up a part of it and looked it over, but couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Neville saw Satsuki's distress and explained. "The first part is the preface. It's chock-full of legal terms, but don't be too scared. The rest of it describes the job duties and pay. The most important part is the job duties. First of all the duties is that you'll act as Edward's fiancée. Next is that you'll appear

at the engagement party in May to be recognized by everyone. And the final objective is to have a marriage within the year."

"A marriage?!" Satsuki shouted in surprise.

"Are you a practicing Christian, Satsuki?" Edward asked with concern.

"No, I'm a Buddhist," Satsuki replied.

Actually, he was an atheist, but foreigners didn't really understand that, so he had prepared this response.

"Then that's not a problem," Edward said with relief.

Neville grinned. "Yeah. That was the biggest obstacle, but you being Buddhist knocks it out of our way."

"What do you mean there's no problem?"

Satsuki still seemed to have quite a few problems. The engagement party wasn't so bad, but now they wanted a marriage.

"You're not going to tell us that you can't lie in church, even though you're not a Christian?" Neville asked.

Satsuki could only shake his head.

Neville continued. "You're going to go on a honeymoon after the wedding. You can just pretend to go, though. You've got your school schedule to consider, too. We'll try to plan around your vacations as much as possible."

It seemed they'd respected Satsuki's desire to keep attending school. But he still wasn't completely reassured.

"In the middle of the honeymoon," Neville went on, "you'll have a fight and get a divorce. And that will be the end of your role. You two will sever all ties. Even if you see each other in the street, you'll act like strangers. This is so that Edward's marriage isn't discovered to be a sham after the plan's been executed."

"In short, I leave him at the airport instead of the altar."

Satsuki agreed. He liked that there would be no future obligations. No matter what happened, he would be able to finish school in three years and go back to Japan. He didn't see any problems.

"Now, while the plan is in effect, Lord Argyle has one request of you," Neville added.

"What's that?" Satsuki asked.

"He wants you to stay in the apartment with him," was the reply.

"What?" he cried out.

"It would be a lot of trouble to call you all the way here every time he needed you for something," Neville pointed out.

"But..." Satsuki couldn't think of how to respond. He couldn't picture himself living with Edward. They had been born and had lived in entirely different places. And the blond was a nobleman. Their worlds were just too different.

"If you can't answer right away, we can set that aside for the moment and discuss your pay." Neville turned a page over. "Three hundred pounds per day, paid every day from the signing of the contract. All your expenses will be paid by Lord Argyle until the

end of the contract. And a 10,000-pound bonus upon successful completion of the plan."

There were three months until the engagement party. That worked out to quite a large amount by the end. Satsuki began to fear the huge amount of money he would have when it was all over. He almost felt like he was assisting in a crime. He probably wouldn't just get away scott-free if they were caught.

"And if something goes wrong?" he asked.

Neville had the answer to that too. "In cases of illness or other unavoidable circumstances, or if the plan is interrupted by a third party, the balance earned so far will be paid to you. But if you deliberately sabotage the plan, you will pay back a percentage of the money to Lord Argyle."

"Deliberately sabotage it?" Satsuki echoed, confused.

Neville nodded. "Yes, for example, selling information about the plan to the media is a violation of the contract. If you do it right, you could make more than Lord Argyle is paying you."

"Aren't you part of the media, Neville?" Satsuki asked.

Neville nodded again. "Yes, but if I leak word of this, I take on the responsibility of paying you. Even if my luck ever turned around, I wouldn't have that kind of money, so don't worry about me. I just ask that you give me the best seat at the engagement party and wedding. And maybe an interview after the divorce. That's everything in the contract, though. Any questions?"

"What if the plan fails because I don't act well enough to convince people?" Satsuki wanted to know.

"I'd rather not think about it," Neville answered. "But in that case, the contract is finished. But you won't receive any compensation, either. So do your best work so that that doesn't happen. Of course, we'll do all we can to help. Anything else?"

Satsuki shook his head.

Neville faced his friend. "And how about you, Edward?"

"Aside from the question of where Satsuki will live, nothing," the blond replied.

"Surely you don't intend to force May to stay here against his will?" Neville crossed out the sentence concerning living arrangements in the documents. "Let's just remove this clause. We can think about it again if we discover any problems once we've started."

Edward seemed displeased, but eventually agreed.

"Then sign," Neville said.

Satsuki nodded. He wouldn't back out now, having come so far.

"The contract's been finalized and agreed upon by all parties," Neville said once all three had signed. "I'm glad that went well. It would have been a lot worse with a woman. We probably would have had to write clauses protecting her virtue."

"Neville, please." Edward made a face of distaste.

"Sorry," Neville said. "I got carried away with my little jokes. But the signing of the contract calls for

a little celebration, don't you think?"

"You're after that wine I got last week, aren't you?" Edward laughed, his good mood recovered.

"I sure am," Neville agreed. "I hear it's a pretty good vintage."

"Well, help yourself to it," his friend offered. "I'm going to take Satsuki shopping."

Satsuki eyed Edward suspiciously. "Shopping? For what?"

"Clothes and bags and shoes, outfitting you from head to toe," Edward replied.

"Why?" Satsuki asked.

"Well, if you have your own dresses, I suppose I don't need to," Edward said, his voice wry.

"But, right now?" Satsuki protested.

"Yes," Edward answered firmly.

"That's part of earning your 300 pounds a day. Get to it." Neville waved to Satsuki.

"Neville!"

But the cry seemingly fell on deaf ears as Neville disappeared into the kitchen.

Edward brought him to Bond Street, where famous designer shops crowded the street-front. The displays were arranged to flaunt how top-end and expensive the shops were. The blond pushed open the door to one of these stores. It didn't seem like the kind of place Satsuki could enter dressed in his street clothes—a down jacket, worn-out jeans, and dirty sneakers. Edward started pushing Satsuki into

the store, oblivious to his hesitation. Satsuki screwed up his courage and went in, and all the saleswomen turned toward them in unison. Four or five saleswomen immediately gathered around Edward.

"Lord Argyle!"

"What can we do for you today?"

"We just got a shipment of things you're going to love, sir."

"I came to buy some clothes for my lady friend here," Edward said, winking at Satsuki. It seemed the performance had begun.

All of the salesladies began complimenting Satsuki.

"Well, what a sweet-looking girl."

"What beautiful black hair and eyes."

"And such lovely skin."

Satsuki answered their praise with a smile. If he spoke carelessly, the jig might be up.

"What are you looking for?" one woman asked.

"Everything," Edward replied decisively.

"Everything in the store that suits her."

Satsuki gasped. When they had first come into the store, he had glanced at the tag on an outfit in the window. It was equal to all the money he usually spent for three months.

The woman beamed. "That's the Lord Argyle we know. Everything will be ready in a moment."

It seemed that the women were used to this sort of thing and, smiling cheerfully, they dispersed into the store searching for things that would look good on Satsuki. And before very long, they had amassed a

mountain of clothes in front of him. They immediately paraded their choices one after another.

"This bag is very popular. We only have one left in stock. It would look perfect on you, miss."

"And this coat..."

Satsuki was easily bored stiff, but he suffered the presentations with smile after smile. When they had finished, he took an armful of clothes and closed himself off in a mirrored changing room.

The saleswomen had treated Satsuki like he was a child. Japanese people look quite young to Westerners and he looked like a pre-teen to them. They had probably told themselves that that was why he had no breasts.

He changed into a pale pink skirt suit. He checked himself in the mirror to make sure nothing looked suspicious. But he had no reason to fear. His delicate features were too slight to ever suggest a man's face. Nor was he particularly tall. Compared to Western women, he was small. And thanks to his negligence in getting his hair cut, his tresses fell to his shoulders and made him look quite girlish. Large, sharply slanted eyes. A coy nose. Full lips. He understood as well as anyone else why the older students had so much fun making him dress as a girl in high school.

"To think I came all the way to England just to cross-dress again."

He laughed at himself derisively. But the girl in the mirror looked back coyly.

When he came out of the changing room, all the saleswomen heaped flattery on him,

knowing their business well.

"How do I look?" Satsuki asked Edward, smiling brightly.

Edward's eyes widened in surprise. "You're a beautiful lady, no doubt about it."

Three hours later, Satsuki left the store completely transformed. He now wore a cashmere long coat in place of his down jacket, and a skirt instead of jeans. He had on leather high-heeled boots, not sneakers, and carried an expensive bag and showed off a beautiful watch.

Everything he wasn't wearing was sent to Edward's apartment. He didn't want to send the things to his own apartment anyway, but, if he had, it would have filled the room completely.

Edward took Satsuki's hand as he got into a taxi. "I made a lunch reservation for us at a hotel," he said.

They got out at the restaurant at the Hotel Ritz.

An ornate chandelier hung from the high ceiling, bathing the room in a vibrant glow. The restaurant was rated the best in London for food, service, and ambiance.

A man who must have been the maitre d' appeared as soon as they arrived. "My lord, we've been waiting for you," he said.

He guided them to a spot in the restaurant with an even better view.

Satsuki walked with his arm linked with Edward's. He was reluctant to be that close, but it distracted him from his inability to walk in his new shoes.

It was probably his imagination, but everyone seemed to be staring at them.

The maitre d' pulled his chair out for him and Satsuki sat down. He took a deep breath and looked around once more.

Everyone was well-dressed. No one was wearing the jersey of their favorite soccer team, like they did in the pub where he worked.

"What will you have, Satsuki?" Edward asked, opening the menu.

"I don't really know. I'll let you order for me," Satsuki said, completely paralyzed by the prices he saw in the menu.

Edward called the waiter over and ordered their meal skillfully.

The wine came first. Edward didn't like it after doing a tasting, and so they brought another bottle. It was a good wine, and the sheer luxury of so easily opening another bottle shocked Satsuki.

The meal was chilled Scottish salmon and roast beef, the foundation of all British cooking. Even though British food in general is quite disgusting, Satsuki discovered that you get what you pay for—the meal was exquisite.

After they had eaten, they went to a shop on Regent Street and once more bought everything in the store. Satsuki rallied himself and pretended to enjoy the shopping. Then, starting to truly have fun, the two went to Harrods to buy wigs, makeup, and women's underwear.

That night, when they'd gotten back to

Edward's apartment, Satsuki was feeling playful. He changed into something fancy and put on some padded lingerie, a wig and some makeup. His experience with cross-dressing in the drama club was really coming in handy. And he was finally wearing something appropriate for his age. When he was finished, he and Edward once more locked arms and went to see a new opera piece at the Royal Opera. Afterwards, they had dinner at the Café Royal, a very old restaurant which, before it opened in the 19th century, had served as an important meeting place and host to historical events.

Edward once again ordered an expensive wine, and Satsuki ate dove breast for the first time in his life.

Having spent the entire day with Edward, Satsuki felt he had misjudged the man earlier. The blond wasn't the bad person he had first thought, and the man wasn't even all that strange. He listened attentively to everything Satsuki said and went to great lengths to prevent Satsuki from getting bored. If pressed to name a fault, Satsuki would say that maybe Edward was too rich. During the shopping today, Edward's freedom with his money had honestly shocked Satsuki.

After they finished dessert, a waiter brought them coffee.

Edward solemnly took out a ring—the heirloom.

"I had the size adjusted to fit you." He took Satsuki's hand and slipped the ring onto a finger while Satsuki stared in surprise. It fit his ring finger perfectly. "I'm proposing again." Edward smiled. This was a

performance to shame the professionals.

Satsuki smiled back, rising to the challenge.

"I'm so happy."

"I'm glad it pleases you," Edward said, squeezing Satsuki's hand.

The man saying these things to him was a handsome blond. A woman would have started dancing in Satsuki's place. And maybe it was the fault of the wine he had drunk, but Satsuki's pulse quickened a little, too.

When the meal ended and they stood up, Satsuki realized that the wine had affected him more than he had thought. Combined with the unfamiliar shoes, he began to stagger and was in no condition to walk without support. He and Edward linked arms once more and left the restaurant.

A bright flash of light blinded Satsuki and he heard the sound of a camera shutter whirring. He was momentarily stunned.

"Good evening, Lord Argyle," a voice greeted.

A woman appeared out of the darkness, a camera slung around her neck. She seemed to be in her mid-30s. Her copper-colored hair was tied back sloppily and she wore no makeup. She was also dressed very casually in slacks and a jacket.

"Good evening, Ms. Mostern. Still as dedicated to your work as ever, I see." Edward smiled. The two seemed to know each other. "I just wish you'd said something before taking the picture."

"I'm sorry. But you certainly seem to be in a good mood tonight. Have you heard some good news?"

A deliberate smile twitched across her face. Her eyes fell on the ring on Satsuki's finger. "Why, a ring!" Satsuki tried to hide his left hand, but the damage had been done. "The Argyle family ring! Does this mean that you've finally picked one?" She seemed to know what the ring meant.

"Please don't be so tactless," Edward reprimanded softly. "I've just proposed today."

Ms. Mostern smiled. "Well congratulations! She's a lovely girl. What's your name, dear?"

Satsuki hesitated then responded defiantly. "May."

"May? Are you Chinese?"

Edward cut the woman off. "I'm terribly sorry, but we've got somewhere to be. We must be going. If you want to do a real interview some time, I'll answer any questions you might have."

"I apologize," Ms. Mostern said, backing down. "But this is wonderful news. I'd like to write about it, if I may. I'll send you a copy."

"Right." Edward threw out the disinterested response and hailed a cab passing by the restaurant.

"The Hotel Claridge in Mayfair," he said to the driver through the window. This was part of the experience of taking a London taxi, you had to negotiate the destination before getting in.

The driver nodded, so Edward helped Satsuki in, then got into the taxi himself.

"Have a wonderful evening." The woman, who had heard the hotel name, smiled meaningfully as the two drove off.

"Who was that woman?" Satsuki asked.

"A society page journalist for a tabloid," Edward answered.

"Like a reporter for 'Focus' or 'Friday' in Japan?" Satsuki almost asked, shocked, before realizing that Edward wouldn't know. He changed his question. "Do things like that happen to you often?"

"Once in a while," Edward said, glancing at Satsuki. His answer seemed highly suspicious. "Satsuki, I really did want to take you back to your apartment," he said apologetically, "but will you stay with me at the hotel tonight, in case that reporter is watching?"

Satsuki nodded. If they were being followed and Edward dropped him off at his apartment, the reporter would easily find out Satsuki's true identity and everything would be over. Anyway, tomorrow was Sunday, so he didn't need to go home.

Eventually the taxi pulled up in front of a well-aged luxury hotel.

As they crossed the marble floor under the chandelier-lit arched entrance, Edward pulled Satsuki to him in an embrace.

"Huh?" Satsuki squeaked.

Before he realized what was happening, Edward had leaned down and placed a kiss on his lips. He felt the softness of the man's lips. A tongue pushed its way into his slightly open mouth and began probing deeper. It was a real kiss, the first one he ever had.

Satsuki came to his senses and pushed Edward away.

"What are you doing?" Satsuki glared at Edward, wiping his mouth off with the back of his hand.

"We're engaged," Edward admonished. "Or did you forget that I just proposed to you at the Café Royal?"

Satsuki had no answer to that. Be Edward's fiancée—that was what Satsuki had to do in exchange for 300 pounds a day. He had been in such a pleasant haze from the wonderful food and wine that he had forgotten why he was there.

It was natural for an engaged couple to kiss. He was clearly wrong to have refused.

He hung his head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't look so serious." Edward gently kissed Satsuki's forehead. And, taking Satsuki's hand, they went to the check-in desk.

The desk clerk had only to see Edward's face before silently producing a key. Satsuki wondered how many other lovers Edward had brought here before. He followed the blond, looking slightly pale. To others, he must have looked like a reluctant young girl on her first night.

The room was, as one might imagine, a suite. The immaculate space spread out before them, highlighted by luxurious decorations. If he hadn't already been to Edward's apartment, Satsuki would have been afraid to even step into the room.

Edward ordered a scotch whiskey from room service.



"Today must have been tiring," he commented. He nodded at the king size bed, and Satsuki sat down so the man could help him take off his shoes.

"I'm sorry I didn't act better." Satsuki was dejected. For someone who wanted to be a performer, he had done a miserable job.

"Not at all. You did great." Edward squeezed Satsuki's hand and smiled kindly. "There's still a long way to go, so don't wear yourself out now."

The man's kindness was too overwhelming and Satsuki fumbled his way through an excuse. "I...I'm bad at kissing. Even kissing to greet people bothers me. In Japan, only lovers kiss each other, so I'm not used to it."

"You'll get used to it," Edward said, looking Satsuki straight in the eye.

"You mean—"

Edward's lips brushed Satsuki's own. Satsuki closed his eyes instinctively. Edward took his lips away, then brushed them once more across Satsuki's.

"Just relax," he said with a little laugh.

Shivering from the stress of the kisses that touched one moment and didn't touch the next, Satsuki thought he must have looked completely foolish.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door as room service arrived. The boy, dressed in a stiff uniform, wheeled a cart with scotch and a light snack into the room. And when Edward signed the check, he left again with due decorum.

"I bet that guy thinks I'm your girlfriend," Satsuki said, trying to cover his embarrassment.

"Probably," Edward agreed. "Maybe we should've shown him something a little more extreme."

Satsuki smiled ambiguously, having no idea how to respond.

"In any event," Edward continued, "we'll pretend to be the ferocious lovers everyone thinks we are and stay the night here, then check out at noon. So enjoy hotel life."

Most lovers probably didn't stay at suite rooms in such expensive hotels. Satsuki couldn't imagine ever being able to reserve a hotel suite for his own future girlfriend.

"Do you want some?" Edward held out a shot glass full of brown liquid.

Satsuki accepted the glass and, without stopping to think, threw back the entire thing in one shot. His throat and then his guts were on fire in an instant. Apparently, he could get drunk from a single drink.

Edward reached out and pressed a hand to Satsuki's cheek. "Do you feel better?"

Satsuki realized that he had been tense the entire time. "Yeah."

"Then let's get back to practicing." Edward smiled, making Satsuki's heart pound. He was so handsome that he could make even men's pulses race.

Satsuki decided to just give it a try and closed his eyes. Still, his body shook slightly. He felt a light touch on his lips. When he thought Edward had pulled away, he felt the touch again. The gentle kisses began to relax him, one by one.

"This is an affectionate kiss," Edward murmured. After several rounds, he gave a slightly longer kiss. "This is the first kiss of two young teenagers. And this..."

At the sensation of Edward's tongue slowly tracing over his lips, chills ran up and down Satsuki's spine. He pulled back suddenly, but Edward took a strong hold of his shoulders so he couldn't move. Edward's tongue pushed its way into his mouth, slightly open in surprise, and ran over his teeth. And it invaded deeper still. Satsuki surrendered himself to it. Maybe it was because he was drunk, but, unbelievably, he accepted the kiss without any resistance.

"It's not every day you get to kiss a foreigner," he thought indolently.

"There should be a little more cooperation in a lover's kiss," Edward murmured.

These words, while they were close enough that their bodies might touch, lit a fire under Satsuki's pride as a performer. He wrapped his arms around Edward's neck.

"That's good," Edward crooned.

They kissed again, a kiss deep enough to make Satsuki dizzy. A sweet sigh spilled from him unconsciously.

"Still don't have the hang of it?" Edward asked after a while, moving away.

Satsuki shook his head.

"I can't believe how fast my heart's beating," he thought.

At a loss for words, his face suddenly grew red.

"I suppose it's too much work to do all at once," Edward said. "We'll practice again another time."

Satsuki was relieved to hear this. He was afraid his heart might burst out of his chest at any moment, and it didn't seem like it would calm down any time soon.

An English breakfast was served by room service the next morning.

Freshly squeezed orange juice and cornflakes, fried eggs, crisp bacon, piping hot sausages, steamed tomatoes and mushrooms, toast, and tea. It was a lot to eat so early in the morning, but Satsuki polished it all off.

"You always seem happiest when you're eating, Satsuki," Edward commented, laughing.

"I haven't had something as lavish as this since I came to England," Satsuki said, red-faced, trying to excuse his behavior.

"Just watching you makes me happy. It's been a while since I felt that," Edward said brightly, looking straight at Satsuki with his blue eyes.

"What is this guy's life usually like?"

It was strange to Satsuki. Edward had a fortune and never needed to work. Just the money he had spent yesterday was a huge amount. It was a frivolousness that a commoner could never understand. And he lived in an opulent apartment in a high-end housing area. He was young, had a title and a beautiful face

that made everyone stare. Normal people dreamed about everything that was a reality for him. What did happiness mean to someone like him?

"Don't you have a girlfriend?" Satsuki asked suddenly. He had been wondering about that. He was sure that the woman Edward couldn't seduce didn't exist. It seemed to make more sense to seduce the woman he was interested in than to recruit a fall guy.

"A girlfriend?" Edward seemed a little surprised by this unexpected question. "Maybe the girl in front of me right now," he teased, expertly dodging the question.

"What are your plans for today, anyway?" Satsuki asked, changing the subject when he realized how rude it was to question Edward about his romantic interests.

"Oh yes. Where would you like to go?" the blond asked.

"The zoo," Satsuki said after some hesitation.

"The zoo?" Edward echoed, confused.

"It's actually an assignment for school," Satsuki admitted. "We have to mimic animals. So I have to find an animal to use as a reference."

"I haven't been to the zoo since elementary school," Edward said. "That might be nice for a change of pace."

Satsuki was relieved that the man had agreed.

The two went out together to the London Zoo in Regency Park. This zoo let in for free all theater students with ID. But dressed up like a woman, Satsuki was reluctant to show his ID. He instead paid the

entrance fee with Edward.

Despite the blustering winter wind, there were as many visitors to the zoo as in any other weekend. Families. Young lovers. He even saw some classmates who had come for the same reason he had.

He felt very nervous whenever he passed a classmate, but thanks to the long wig and makeup, no one ever recognized him.

He was in a strange frame of mind.

Satsuki felt bad for Edward since they wound up walking around the zoo in icy weather for more than two hours, freezing themselves solid. Edward's apartment was nearby, so they went there to take advantage of his fireplace.

When they got to the place, Neville was there to meet them. It looked like he'd been staying at the apartment in its owner's absence. Edward didn't look particularly surprised. Satsuki had heard that English people arranged things a month in advance when they wanted to visit each other's homes, but it seemed no such formalities restrained these two.

"You're a whole new person, May," Neville said. "Transformed from a poor exchange student into a young lady. It's true that clothes make the man."

Satsuki wasn't sure how to respond to this.

"Oh yes," the man continued. "A ton of packages came for you. You really went all out, didn't you Edward?"

"We're still not done," Edward replied evenly.

He really seemed to think so.

"I had the maid put the things into a spare room," Neville said.

His friend nodded. "Thanks. It's a good thing you were here."

"But why did you send it all here?" Neville asked. "Shouldn't you have sent it straight to May's apartment?"

"My place is too small, so I wouldn't be able to keep it all there," Satsuki said, a bit bewildered that Neville still sounded so put-out about having to deal with the packages. But having that many packages delivered would put any house into an uproar.

"Are you going to come here every time you need to get something?" Neville asked.

"Yes, I plan to," Satsuki answered.

Neville grunted disinterestedly.

"Satsuki, won't you reconsider my offer to let you live here?" Edward said suddenly. "If we lived together, we could get more comfortable with each other. And if we're tailed by a reporter like last night, the doorman here can run them off. It's more secure."

"They already found out?" Neville raised his eyebrows, impressed.

"Yes," his friend answered dryly. "Ms. Mostern."

"That woman's a bloodhound." Neville spat the words out viciously. "I was sure I'd get the scoop on this one."

"Don't worry about it," Edward assured his friend. "We didn't allow the photos of the actual

proposal at the Café Royal to get out."

"Thanks for your hard work," Neville said sarcastically.

"Now, now, Neville," Edward said. "Weren't you the one who said you wanted to photograph the presentation of the ring?"

Satsuki listened to their conversation in a daze. Apparently, a cameraman had been following them.

"Even when we kissed?"

He felt the blood drain from his face.

"What else did you take pictures of?" he asked, his voice shaking unexpectedly.

"We got pictures of everything," the journalist told him indifferently.

Satsuki felt anger boiling up inside him—they hadn't told him about this!

"Why didn't you tell me beforehand?" Satsuki cried out, cornering Edward.

The blond man couldn't seem to understand Satsuki's anger. A strange look crossed his face.

But Neville was the one to answer. "But look, May, you wouldn't have acted naturally if you'd known there was a camera."

Satsuki couldn't respond. Neville was completely right. He had been nervous enough just walking around yesterday. If he had known that a camera was following them, he would have been even worse off. He hung his head.

Neville had a suddenly serious expression. "Don't worry, May. The story wasn't actually published."

His friend's brows knitted together. "What do you mean?"

"The story was killed," Neville explained. "It seems stories about Lord Argyle's wedding are off limits."

"The old man's been busy," Edward huffed.

"No, I don't think your butler is familiar enough with the tabloid world to influence anything," his journalist friend countered. "Any other guesses?"

"If you mean other people opposed to me marrying, I've got a mountain of relatives I could name," the blond replied. "But this means Ms. Mostern's story was probably blocked, too."

"I'll see if I can find out anything," Neville promised.

Edward smiled. "Thanks."

Satsuki was relieved to hear that the stories about the "engagement" were being blocked. He couldn't imagine seeing his own face in a gossip magazine. But he ought to get used to the idea.

He was getting a lot of money in return for exactly that. And Edward was using even more money for food and entertainment.

"If I stay here, we won't need to stay at hotels like we did last night, right?" Satsuki asked hesitantly.

The amount they'd spent on clothes alone yesterday was so ridiculous that he felt it would be an outrageous waste of money to rent hotel suites all the time.

"That's right," Edward said a little glumly. "Didn't you like the hotel last night?"

Satsuki quickly denied what was being implied. "That's not the problem!" He didn't understand why Edward's mood had suddenly deteriorated. "Well, I think I'll accept your offer to stay here. I want to make it clear that this will not be permanent. But this place is closer to my school, too."

"I'd just like to remind you that if we live together, it might be easy to forget that we need to convince people that we're engaged when we go out," Edward warned. "That could lead to trouble."

"I understand that," Satsuki said.

"Then welcome to my home," Edward proclaimed.

His mood seemed to have improved immediately.

Neville gave a lopsided smile. "That's nice. Maybe this will help alleviate your ennui a bit, Edward. I can't be constantly coming over to see you."

"Is it really all right?" Satsuki prompted.

"Of course it is," Edward assured him. "Use whatever room you want."

And so the issue resolved itself nicely.

Act III

Much Ado About Nothing

Five days passed quickly after Satsuki moved in with Edward.

Whenever he woke up, breakfast would already be waiting for him, prepared by the maid. It was a simple menu of bread, tea, and cheese, but since he had usually skipped breakfast before, he felt like he was in heaven. Then he went to school and, after being in classes straight through from nine in the morning to seven o'clock in the evening, he went home to Edward's apartment. Dinner was usually a pre-cooked Marks & Spencer meal prepared by the maid. Satsuki was surprised to find out how plain the day-to-day food of the nobility was. But it was still far better than eating the pub's fish and chips for dinner every night. It was also an enormous help to not have to work at the pub. Instead, he talked with Edward and learned the Queen's English, the noble way of speaking the language.

Edward had begged Satsuki to teach him Japanese. For Satsuki it was icing on the cake, and he had been happy to earn more money for it, as a part-time job. But Edward didn't try at all, and it was obvious that it was just a way for the man to kill time.

"What are your plans for tomorrow?" Satsuki

asked Edward after dinner on the fifth day. During the week, he'd spent his days doing his old routine, but on the weekends, he'd do as his new employer asked.

"I'm sorry for the short notice, but I'd like to take you up to Dorsett with me," Edward answered.

Satsuki recalled that Edward had told him about an estate he owned there.

"All right." He was ready for it. Last week had been like a rehearsal, but from now on, they would be going live.

The next morning, Edward drove them to Dorsett.

Once they were past the London city limits, the scenery changed into peaceful countryside.

Three-quarters of England is farmland. Despite also being an island nation, it's very different from Japan, where almost all the people are highly concentrated in a few cities.

The car rode over country byways lined with houses. They drove for about three hours.

"Here we are," Edward said to Satsuki, who was seated on the passenger side. The car had stopped in front of a magnificent iron gate. Edward honked the car's horn and a man appeared from a little stone house beside the gate and opened it for them. "That's my gatekeeper and his shed."

Satsuki couldn't believe what Edward was telling him. What the man called the gatekeeper's shed was more impressive than the house his family owned in Japan.

The road continued a long way from the gate, lined on both sides with trees. There was no sign of the manor yet. The car passed through several more gates, covered a sprawling meadow, and crossed a stone bridge. They had easily gone three kilometers when suddenly, the trees cleared away and a magnificent building truly deserving of the name "manor" appeared before them.

Satsuki gasped. The grandeur of the apartment in London had not prepared him for this.

The car pulled up the driveway in front of the entrance. As they got out of the car, the doors opened. An old man in an impeccable black suit appeared and bowed before Edward. "Welcome home, sir."

"I expect nothing happened in my absence?" Edward asked by way of greeting.

"Miss Angelica came to see you, sir," the old man whispered in his ear.

Edward's handsome face clouded over.
"Angelica?"

"Three days ago. You were gone, so she left again. And who is this young lady?" The butler turned his gaze to Satsuki.

"Miss Imamura. My fiancée. May, this is Sidney Padget. He's my very capable butler. He manages this estate," Edward said with a roguish smile.

"Welcome, miss." The butler's face was expressionless, in stark contrast to his warm welcome.

"Thank you." Satsuki smiled despite the fear he felt.

"Prepare the best room in the house for

her," Edward ordered.

"Certainly, sir," the butler said, bowing his head again.

"Wow," Satsuki exclaimed, amazed, when he stepped inside the hall.

A marble checkerboard floor spread out before him, below a beautifully painted high ceiling, which led to a stairway covered in red carpeting. Numerous paintings decorated the walls, and statues were arranged around the room. And on either side of the hall stood several dozen servants, who had lined up to greet Edward on his return.

Satsuki had never seen such a splendid home before in his entire life.

"Please follow me," the butler requested.

Satsuki climbed the stairs after the old man. He noticed that there was even a tasteful design to the handrail. It seemed wrong to touch it without gloves on.

Passing through a gallery in which one wall was made entirely of windows, Satsuki was led to a room.

"Dinner is at 6:30. Please make yourself comfortable here until then," the butler said and then withdrew.

Satsuki carefully inspected his surroundings.

The first thing he noticed was the canopied bed. It looked like a king's bed from a fairy tale. He was also impressed by the fireplace, taller than he was, that actually had a fire burning in it. A large Persian rug was spread out on the floor, and on the wall hung tapestries by Gobelins that looked like they belonged in a museum.

He found a second door and peeked inside it. It was the bathroom, but it was big enough for someone to live in.

Everything was outrageously grand and luxurious.

A clock showed that it was three in the afternoon. There was a lot of time left before dinner.

It looked like Edward wasn't going to come see him, so Satsuki burrowed into the canopied bed, just to see what it felt like. He felt like he had become a king. He savored it, knowing he would never be able to experience this again in his life.

His life before all this seemed unreal, wandering aimlessly and pressed for money.

"He's a god of good fortune."

Edward's face floated up in his mind. He remembered that the life he was leading now was due to Brenda's death, and he was seized by a miserable feeling.

He let the memories wash over him for a bit, but, because of the long drive, he was soon fast asleep.

"Why did Angelica come here?" Edward asked when the butler came to his room.

Angelica was a cousin from his father's side of the family, seven years older than him. Specifically, she was the daughter of his father's younger brother Stuart. In English law, aristocratic inheritance passes only to the oldest son. If there is no son, the family line ends there.

Edward's uncle, the second son, had been raised as the son of Lord Argyle, but never attained nobility status. These circumstances deeply affected the man. Because he couldn't have a title, he became obsessed with running the Argyle family company. His desire had become even more overt after the death of Edward's father.

Edward's father seemed to have anticipated this development by naming Edward's maternal cousin Gordon the beneficiary of his estate if the heir didn't carry out his duties. If Edward didn't marry, according to the will, total control of the company would pass to Gordon. And if that happened, Edward's uncle Stuart, who was in charge of the company as Edward's steward, would be forced to withdraw his control. Of course, his uncle wasn't going to stand silently by while that happened.

It was natural to think that Edward's supposed engagement to the Simon girl, which resulted in the contract with Satsuki, could be traced back to his uncle's manipulations.

And like her father, Angelica was a woman rich with ambition. Eight years ago, she had married an American tycoon, so Edward had assumed she was still with him in America. He couldn't imagine why she would come all the way to Dorsett. He had a bad feeling about it all.

An oddly embarrassed look crossed the butler's face. "Were you aware that she has gotten divorced?"

"No, I wasn't," Edward responded. "You might say that this news is a little unexpected."

"Miss Angelica has come back to England," the butler continued. "And she believes you ought to marry her."

"What?!" Edward took in this information like a bolt from the blue. "Since it's come to this, tell me the truth, old man, who arranged the marriage to the Simon girl?"

"Master Stuart and myself, sir." The old butler drooped dejectedly. "We both stood to benefit from the arrangement. Master Stuart would remain your steward and run the family's business. And if I may say, having known Master Stuart since his childhood, I would prefer that it remain with him rather than it be transferred to Master Gordon."

"I suspected as much." Edward let out a sigh. The old butler had served the Argyle family since his grandfather's generation, so of course he had taken care of Stuart. Edward didn't have a particularly favorable impression of his uncle, but the butler owed more to his emotions than he did to Gordon.

"We selected very carefully," the butler said earnestly. "Out of the appropriately-aged noblewomen, we searched for the most beautiful and good-natured, who would be most suitable for you."

"Sorry to have put you through so much trouble," Edward said sarcastically.

"No, it no longer matters," the butler said. "I won't direct you any further. You must quickly marry this girl you brought back. Miss Angelica is quite serious. At first, Master Stuart simply laughed the idea off, but Miss Angelica has persuaded him of its merits

and he seems to favor the marriage now as well."

"So my uncle's the one blocking the gossip reports of my engagement," Edward murmured.

"All I desire is that you marry, Master Edward," the butler confessed. "But, I would rather someone, anyone...*other* than Miss Angelica."

He still clearly recalled how Angelica had behaved as a child, her temper flaring whenever her desires were denied, thanks to her spoiled upbringing.

Edward smiled at the old servant. "Relax, old man. There's no way I'm marrying Angelica."

All he remembered of Angelica was shining blonde hair and spirited green eyes. Behaving however she wished, there had been times that he had found her offensive, and also times that he had envied her.

"Another matter, Master Edward..." The butler hesitated.

"What is it, old man?" Edward prompted.

"Would you tell me again the name of the young woman you brought with you today?" the butler finally asked.

"Imamura. That's I-ma-mu-ra," Edward instructed precisely.

The excellent servant remembered the names and faces of all of his master's guests, but he had been unable to remember Satsuki's name and was quite distressed by the fact. It had sounded too strange to stick in his memory.

"Imamura... Imamura..." he muttered Satsuki's name to himself like a prayer.

After the butler left the room, Edward sighed.

He honestly didn't care about the title or the fortune. His father had always been busy with work and had never stayed at home. And his mother had distracted herself from his father's absence by doing nothing, but charity work. No matter how Edward excelled at school, his parents never looked his way. The young Edward had put up with the situation quite patiently. His desires had always been locked away.

Perhaps it was an ironic twist of fate that both of his parents, whom he hardly ever saw, had died in a car accident. Wanting to feel love from his own relatives seemed like a modest desire. In a normal family, such a thing would be taken for granted. They had ignored him because of their money and position, and he would have nothing to do with those things.

Not only that, but they had brought him nothing but trouble. Edward couldn't count the number of people who had come to him, attracted by his title or his fortune. Men and women both had their eyes on the things Edward represented. He was tired of relationships like that. He was paralyzed. He didn't care about anything anymore.

It had only been a whim to rebel against the talk of marriage when it came up. He didn't actually care if he married anyone or not. He had felt a bit guilty about forcing Satsuki into such a pitiful position, but when he was with Satsuki, it helped him to forget his pent-up feelings.

Satsuki's single-minded determination in coming to a distant country to follow his dreams touched something inside Edward. He had long lost any

purpose in his life. He wanted to keep Satsuki nearby as much as possible. One might almost say he was fooled by the plan he had created.

He didn't know why he felt that way.

Edward headed to the room where Satsuki was staying. He knocked on the door, but there was no reply.

"Satsuki?" he whispered.

He went into the room and looked around. Eventually, he noticed a lump in the sheets on the bed. He peeked into the sheets cautiously.

Satsuki was asleep, his face completely unguarded. He must have been tired out by the drive. His long eyelashes cast shadows across his face. His glossy black hair lay across his cheek and Edward gently brushed it off. The white skin of East Asians always looked as smooth as a porcelain doll's.

Edward stroked Satsuki's cheek with a finger. He felt not the coolness of porcelain, but the warmth of a human being. He placed a tender kiss on Satsuki's lips to wake him up.

A fresh scent came to Satsuki's nostrils.

"It smells like Edward's cologne," he thought sleepily.

Something warm brushed his lips. When he opened his eyes, he saw Edward's smiling face in front of him.

"You should get up," Edward said. "It's time for dinner."

"I'm sorry." Satsuki got up quickly.

The blond had put on a white tie. He was dressed as if he was going out to a party, though it was just dinner at home. Satsuki was confused.

"Should I change, too?" he inquired.

"Probably," was the answer. "It's rather formal, so maybe a dinner dress?"

Someone had brought the bags they'd packed into the car at London into the room while Satsuki had been asleep. He took out a cream colored, raw silk, floor-length dress. It was slightly open at the chest, but if he wore a high-collared beaded jacket, that wouldn't be a problem. He put up his hair and cleared the signs of sleep from his face, put on some lipstick, and the preparations were complete.

"It doesn't look weird?" Satsuki asked Edward.

He was a little uneasy since the man had watched the entire process in silence.

"It's fine. You look cute." Edward nodded, looking satisfied. "Well then, my lady, may I take your arm?"

Satsuki gingerly put his hand around the offered arm.

The sun had already set and the windows were filled with deep black shadows. Passing through the dim gallery, they went downstairs. Satsuki was escorted into a spacious dining room and was seated at a dinner table that could easily seat eight people. A lit candelabra was placed on the table and the silver

tableware was meticulously set out.

Once Edward had escorted Satsuki to his place, he took his own seat.

There were only the two of them at the table. But there were a number of waiters, including the butler, standing behind them along the wall.

The meal began with hors d'oeuvres and soup like a truly sophisticated dinner, but Satsuki was so nervous that he could barely taste the food. Making conversation with his host was also difficult. He was so conscious of the people listening behind them that it was all he could do just to nod in response to the conversation so as to avoid slipping up.

"May, are you nervous?" Edward asked curiously, seeing Satsuki's awkward behavior. He chuckled when Satsuki nodded. "Even though you're an actor?"

For Satsuki, it was stranger that Edward was so calm about being watched by so many people. But it was probably because he had grown up being served by people and had become immune to the gaze of others.

Satsuki tried to return Edward's irony in kind. "You're a better performer than I am."

"I'd never thought of that." Edward laughed happily, as if something had greatly amused him.

"It's a bit difficult, so I'll show you around the house," Edward said to Satsuki after dinner, as if searching for a way to please his visitor.

Unable to sulk forever, Satsuki reluctantly agreed.

He was led into the room next to the dining room. There was a billiard table in the middle of it.

"As you can see," Edward said, "this is the billiard room, where the gentlemen gather when their wives have gone to bed."

Satsuki had never known anyone with their own billiard room, but he was no longer surprised by such things. Who knew what else Lord Argyle owned?

They left the billiard room and entered another large room.

"This room is called the bar," Edward went on to explain. "When my mother was alive, she would have parties here for four to six hours at a time, but now it's empty."

Satsuki noticed that this was the first time Edward had ever mentioned his parents.

"Your mother is dead?" he asked.

"She and my father both died in a car accident when I was 20," Edward answered. "Though it wouldn't have made much difference if they did die earlier. My father was always busy with work so I never saw him, and my mother...well, my mother was only concerned with herself."

Satsuki was mortified. He understood what it was like to be unloved by one's parents. His father always came home late, and so whenever his older brother had been in the hospital, he would be alone in the house. He would never forget the desolation he felt spending so much time in a house completely devoid of human warmth.

Had Edward felt the same way Satsuki had?

For the first time, he felt closer to the man.

"Well, one thing's for certain—I have no fond memories of this place. Next, I'll show you the study." Edward gave a bitter smile and hurried out of the bar.

The next room they came to had bookshelves running up to the ceiling, all stuffed-full of ancient books. It was less of a study and more a library of antiques. Satsuki was seized by a feeling that he had wandered into a side room at a major museum.

"I'll show you something interesting, Satsuki." Edward took down a book and gave it to Satsuki. "It's an original copy of *Hamlet*."

Satsuki felt dizzy. Any collector would be eager just to lay eyes on this, but it was stored carelessly. There must be many other treasures buried in this room.

He fearfully turned the pages. He had no chance of understanding it, since it was written in archaic English.

Edward winked at him. "Even British people can't understand it, so don't feel bad."

When they left the study, they looked in on another dining room, different from the one they had eaten in. This one was even bigger, with a table that could seat 12.

"Past there is the room I use for myself," Edward pointed out. "And below are the kitchen and the servants' rooms. That's somewhere I'm not allowed to go."

"Not allowed?" Satsuki echoed.

"They don't like it. I could only go down there for a peek when I was a kid." Edward smiled bitterly.

"Even so, the house is big enough, and pretty old and boring, huh?"

"No! I'm glad I got to see it," Satsuki said earnestly.

Edward smiled cheerfully. "I'm glad you think so."

A surprising amount of time had passed on the tour.

Satsuki felt oppressed by the splendor of the manor. The moment of closeness he had felt in the bar had not followed them to the other areas of the house. Edward was every inch an aristocrat. He was part of a completely different world from the one Satsuki lived in.

Satsuki felt like he finally understood this fully.

An old woman came the next morning to wake Satsuki.

"Are you awake, miss?"

"Good morning," he replied as politely as he could.

"I'm the head maid, McGuyers," the old woman introduced herself, smiling brightly. "Master Edward is so cruel. Everyone in the house is so eager to meet you, young lady, but he hasn't said a word to anyone."

She opened the curtains, allowing the light in.

"I'm May Imamura."

"Miss I..." The old woman hadn't understood the name, and seemed at a complete loss.

"Everyone calls me May," Satsuki said, giving her his other name, not wanting to trouble such a nice woman.

"Shall I call you Miss May, then?" the woman asked.

"Certainly," Satsuki replied.

She seemed relieved. "Miss May, breakfast has been set out in the sunroom."

"Where's the sunroom?" Satsuki inquired.

"It's the room furthest to the south on the first floor," the old lady explained. "Once you're ready, just ring your bell and I'll take you there."

"Thank you, Mrs. McGuyers," Satsuki said.

"Shall I help you get ready?" the old woman inquired politely. "Master Edward said it wasn't necessary if you were feeling worn out by the whole experience."

"No, thank you," Satsuki hurriedly said. "I'm not used to having people help me like that."

"All right," the maid said. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me."

The woman bowed politely and left the room.

Satsuki changed into a brown knitted knee-length dress. He washed his face at the very antique-looking washstand and, when he was completely prepared, he rang the bell for the maid.

The butler appeared instead. He was expressionless as always, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

"Good morning," Satsuki said.

The butler conscientiously returned his

greeting. The man didn't seem like a bad person at all. Satsuki's first impression was that the old servant was difficult to approach, but that was just proof that the butler was English.

"I'll take you to the sunroom," the man said.

"Master Edward has been waiting for you impatiently."

Satsuki left his bedroom, hurried on by the butler.

The sunroom was a bright room, covered in glass windows from floor to ceiling, allowing abundant sunlight to pour in from outside. It was a smaller room and there was no heater, but it was pleasantly warm inside, like a greenhouse.

A small table that seated four had been set for their breakfast.

Edward, already seated, smiled at Satsuki.

"Did you sleep well last night?" he asked.

"Yes." Satsuki gave Edward a light kiss on the cheek as a greeting and then took his own seat. He thought it was a bold move himself, but it came more naturally than he had expected—that was the benefit of practice. He reveled in Edward's look of surprise.

Once seated, he could see the gardens outside the sunroom's grand windows. Everything he could see belonged to Edward, the Lord Argyle.

"You should see the gardens in the springtime," Edward said. "It's the only thing I boast about."

Satsuki nodded.

February was almost over, but there was still no sign of spring.

The next morning, they hurried back to London

so that Satsuki could go back to school.

The butler appeared in Satsuki's room to take his bags.

"Miss Imamura, please take good care of Master Edward," he said, bowing respectfully.

"What?" Satsuki was caught off guard by the butler's frank expression.

A sad look crossed the butler's face. "It's been a long time since I've seen Master Edward in such a positive mood."

"I didn't notice him acting very differently," Satsuki said.

"That's because it's due to you, Miss Imamura," the butler said.

"I'm not so sure about that," Satsuki muttered.

He thought that Edward was just in a good mood because the man was having some fun making Satsuki cross-dress.

"Were you aware that there will be a family gathering in London next month?" the butler asked, hesitating slightly.

Satsuki shook his head. "No, I wasn't."

"I believe some of the family members at the party will make it their business to dislike you," the butler said frankly. "But don't let them discourage you."

"Oh?" Satsuki didn't really understand what the butler was saying.

"Whether they're against it or not, we welcome you," the butler continued. "When Master Edward was young, he was a very bright child and his parents had

great hopes for his future. But as he grew older, his cleverness became a curse. He began to rebel against his father. It was at this time that his parents passed on, and his life has spiraled more and more out of control since then. Those of us who serve Master Edward pray for his happiness. Everyone is quite glad to see that he's decided to settle down."

"I see..." Satsuki murmured.

After a real conversation with the man, Satsuki saw that the butler was, indeed, a good person. He found it difficult to deceive fine people like these.

"I thought they'd all hate me the minute they saw me. I'm a little disappointed," Satsuki said, striking up some conversation with Edward, on their way back to London.

"I know." Edward's response seemed forced somehow.

"I heard there's a party next month," Satsuki said in an off-hand manner.

"Yeah," was the reply. "And the crown prince from some country or other will be there, too. He's visiting England in secret."

"A crown prince?" Satsuki shouted in surprise. He was used to the knowledge of the imperial family in Japan who lived "above the clouds," beyond the world of normal people. He knew he would never in his life be anywhere near them. The royalty of other countries was even more distant to him. But to look at how uninterested Edward was, it seemed that royalty wasn't

anything special for an aristocrat like him.

"Are you going?" Satsuki asked.

"It doesn't involve me."

As a commoner, he couldn't imagine going to such an elegant party that a crown prince would be attending. He wouldn't have the slightest idea of how to behave.

"Of course, and you're coming with me." Edward's voice was pitiless.

Satsuki went pale. "But don't you need perfect manners to go to something like that?"

"You'll start intensive training when we get back." Edward smiled, amused.

"Training for what?" Satsuki squeaked.

"To not embarrass yourself at the party and to become a lady that no one will be able to find fault with," Edward answered, voice matter-of-fact.

Satsuki felt faint.

The lessons were more in the style of the movie "Shall We Dance?" than "My Fair Lady." When Satsuki got home from school, waltz lessons were waiting for him. He danced, following the music and Edward's lead.

"You're pretty good for a beginner," Edward said, sounding impressed.

"We learned it at school," Satsuki said, turning red. He danced poorly for someone who'd already taken classes.

There had been fewer girls than boys in the

class and so when they paired off to dance, there would always be extra boys. The girls in the dance class had been ruthless—they hated being paired with boys who couldn't dance. Once you were branded as a bad dancer, the girls never paired up with you again. And Satsuki had been a horrible dancer. So he'd never paired with a girl, and practicing never made any difference so the gap between him and the others only grew greater.

Satsuki told Edward about all of this.

"You should have told me sooner," Edward chided softly. "I wasted so much time teaching you how to dance."

"I know, I wasn't really thinking," Satsuki said.

"We still have time." Edward smiled kindly.

Satsuki was captivated by Edward's face for a long moment. It was perfect, truly faultless, and the man was smiling just for him. He still hadn't gotten used to that. When Edward looked at him, his heart pounded and it became difficult to breathe.

"Is something wrong?" Edward asked curiously, since he'd suddenly stopped speaking.

"I'm just glad I met you, Edward," he answered truthfully.

"That makes two of us." Edward smiled again and kissed Satsuki softly on the lips.

"*We're still in the middle of practice, so that's okay.*"

Satsuki accepted the kiss without any protest.

As March began, the day of the party arrived. Edward paced the room nervously while he waited for Satsuki to get ready.

"Would you calm down, Edward?" Neville said sharply.

"Calm down? Are you saying I'm not calm?" his friend fired back, face twisted. He seemed upset.

Neville shrugged. "I'll just leave you alone."

The blond man plunked himself into a chair gloomily.

Neville had never seen his friend get this irritable at the slightest things. Even when the subway had been bombed by terrorists three years earlier, he'd seemed unruffled. And now, to see him so completely worked up over a party...he must have been incredibly worried for Satsuki.

Edward had changed lately. For one thing, he drank less. Until recently, he would drown his boredom in alcohol every day. And now, though he'd never shown the slightest concern for anything before, he was worried for Satsuki as if for himself.

"Maybe this is a good thing."

Neville didn't whole-heartedly embrace this idea, however, since the change was due not to him, but the sudden appearance of a young Asian boy.

"May is certainly taking a long time to get ready. I wonder if he's all right," he said, voicing Edward's concerns.

He felt that he understood Edward's mind completely. They had spent enough time together for that. But he still had no power to change his friend.

"There's no room for failure this time," Edward said finally, smiling.

Foreign royalty would also be attending this party. If Satsuki were to be revealed, the scandal might not be limited to England.

At last, the door opened and Satsuki appeared, his preparations complete.

Neville gasped despite himself.

Satsuki was wearing a formal, white, Chinese-style dress with a deep slit up the thigh and no slip. Gold embroidery decorated the silk material. Edward had custom-ordered it from a top designer and set no limit on the price. It suited Satsuki's slender body well and made it impossible to believe that he was actually a boy. His black hair was swept up, revealing a coquettish glimpse of the nape of his neck. Perhaps his makeup added to the effect. But there was no mistaking that a beautiful woman cloaked in Asian mystique stood before them.

Neville whispered, "May, you look like a whole new person."

Satsuki smiled brightly. "Good evening, Mr. Oakley."

"Oh, no." Neville waved the name away. "Please don't talk to me so formally."

Edward took one of Satsuki's hands, which were covered by long lace gloves, and placed a kiss on the back of it.

"Satsuki, you are truly beautiful," Edward said

passionately, with no trace of his former impatience. The passion of his voice implied that, had Neville not been there, he would have snatched Satsuki up in his arms and kissed her.

"Thank you." Satsuki lowered his eyes as color flooded his cheeks.

"So May's interested too, eh?"

Neville let out a small sigh, overwhelmed by the feeling that he had been abandoned. Still, it was uncomfortable. Up until now, it had always been him by Edward's side, no matter what cold looks they had received from everyone who saw them together. Edward himself had wanted him there. But now, it was obvious that he was an intruder.

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it. It's probably your driver," Neville, unable to stay in the room another moment, went to the door.

But he was rendered speechless by the unexpected visitor at the door. Instead of the driver, it was a blonde woman with a bearing somewhat similar to Edward's—it was his cousin Angelica.

He had been negligent in not checking who was at the door before opening it. If it had been a terrorist, he could have been killed before he knew what was happening.

"Is Edward here?" The woman smiled seductively. "And have we met somewhere before?"

"Yes, at the late Lord Argyle's funeral," he replied.

"I remember now. You're Edward's school

friend," the woman said.

"I'm flattered that you remember." The corner of Neville's mouth twitched.

In addition to her shining blonde hair, she had been blessed with a graceful face, seductive red lips, and green eyes. The woman before him was an indisputable beauty. But it was dangerous to judge this woman by her appearance alone.

"Be a dear and call Edward for me, would you?" the woman ordered.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure he wants to see you," Neville said.

"Well!" Angelica's green eyes glared at Neville. She pushed him aside and went into the sitting room calling out her cousin's name. "Edward!"

"Angelica?" Edward, just coming out to the hall with Satsuki, looked bewildered by the sudden appearance of his cousin.

"Don't gape like such a fool," Angelica snapped.

"I just had no idea that you would be coming, cousin," Edward said.

"Well, I've been waiting for quite some time for you to extend an invitation," Angelica said.

Edward raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"But I finally got tired of waiting and came over myself. Now then, let's go," Angelica commanded.

"Go where?" Edward asked.

It was only natural that Edward was confused by his cousin's assertiveness.

"To tonight's party, of course," Angelica snapped.

"Unfortunately, I already have a date," Edward said.

Angelica cut him off quickly. "That's not my problem." She seemed to think the world centered on her.

"I'm afraid I can't take you to the party," Edward said.

"So you're going to embarrass me?" Angelica shrieked.

"Embarrass you...?" Edward trailed off.

Neville didn't think Angelica possessed such delicate feelings, either.

"Anyway, it's time to go, Edward." Neville nudged his friend. It had only been a waste of time to argue here.

"My father is waiting, too. Let's go." Angelica seized Edward's hand and started pulling him out.

"Angelica!" Edward protested.

The woman stopped. "What? Edward, there's a rumor that the queen herself will be making an appearance tonight. Are you willing to dirty the face of the family in front of her?"

Satsuki's body stiffened and he clung to Edward's arm, as if begging for his protection. Neville had seen Satsuki's face growing steadily paler. It was clear that Angelica was frightening him.

Edward peered at Satsuki's face, his eyes narrowing with concern. Satsuki looked up at him, eyes shining with worry.

Edward smiled gently and squeezed Satsuki's hands lightly to comfort him.

"Maybe we were being too optimistic this time," he said. "But there will be plenty of other opportunities." He then turned to his friend. "Neville, take care of May."

Having entrusted Satsuki to Neville's care, Edward agreed to accompany Angelica.

Satsuki stared dumbly at what was happening.

All of the effort he had put into preparing for today was for nothing.

"Who was that woman?" Satsuki asked Neville after Edward had gone. He couldn't restrain the demanding tone in his voice.

"Lady Angelica, Edward's cousin, and a candidate for becoming his bride," was the explanation.

"His cousin?" Satsuki echoed.

A light went off in his head. The two had shared a certain aura beyond even their beautiful golden hair and perfect faces.

"He said he doesn't want to marry her. Who does she think she is?" After a pause, he murmured, "But she is beautiful, isn't she?"

She had been incomparable, even beside Edward. They would make a good couple, indeed.

"There's a lot going on behind the scenes," Neville said. "That woman you just saw drove away her first husband. Well, it's going to take a while to explain, so why don't we go to the party, too?"

"Without Edward?" Satsuki's voice was suddenly sullen. Edward was Edward. He had run off

with his cousin the moment she called him. It was partly Satsuki's own fault for freezing when he heard that the queen would attend, but all he had wanted was reassurance from Edward. But to just be left behind instead...

"If he had just said 'You'll be fine'..."

Remembering how Edward and Angelica had been snuggling made Satsuki feel irritated. He honestly felt that he was the one who belonged by Edward's side.

"But he doesn't need me."

Somehow, this thought made Satsuki's heart ache.

"We'll meet him there," Neville said. "Besides, you heard that the queen is supposed to be making an appearance. You can't let the chance to attend a party like this just slip by!" He grinned, trying to encourage Satsuki.

When they arrived at the party, Satsuki was struck by the overwhelming feeling that he was on a movie set. A tide of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen rippled beneath a sparkling chandelier.

He spotted Edward immediately. No matter how large the crowd was, Edward always stood out. But there were several layers of people surrounding him and it didn't look like Satsuki could get close. Plus, this Edward, smilingly affably and socializing with so many people, seemed like an entirely different person to the Edward that Satsuki knew.

Satsuki was once again made aware of the immeasurably great distance between the two of them.

Anyway, once this farce was over, he and Edward would be complete strangers to each other. He would probably never see the man again for the rest of his life.

"Oh, you two came, too?" Before Satsuki and Neville could reach Edward, Angelica came up to them. She held a glass of red wine in one hand and smiled at them beautifully.

Satsuki hadn't noticed Angelica's dress at Edward's apartment because she had been covered up by a jacket, but now, he saw that it was red with large openings that exposed her cleavage and the small of her back. It was a bold dress, and he had trouble deciding how to look at her.

"I don't know who you are or why you're hanging around Edward, but I'm getting tired of you." Angelica glared pointedly at Satsuki. The angry gaze of a foreigner was powerful, and even more so coming from a beautiful woman.

"You'll have to talk to Edward about that. It has nothing to do with me," Satsuki replied rebelliously.

"Well, aren't you cheeky! Let me make this clear for you—Edward is too good for you," Angelica hissed.

"And not for a woman like you?" Satsuki retorted. "I heard you're quite a bit older than him."

Angelica's eyebrows shot up. "What do you mean, 'quite a bit'?"

Neville was listening to their conversation

with great amusement.

"It's not a big enough difference to matter," Angelica said haughtily. "You, on the other hand, seem quite young. I wonder if you know what it means to be the wife of Lord Argyle."

"No," Satsuki said abruptly.

"You have no business being in the Argyle family," Angelica spat out.

"I'm not particularly interested in being the wife of an aristocrat," Satsuki said calmly.

"Everyone pretends to be in it for love at first," Angelica mocked. "But they change their tune soon enough. You shouldn't act so superior."

"Like you?" Satsuki fired back.

Angelica moved deftly, tipping the contents of her wine glass onto his dress. She'd emptied it in the blink of an eye.

"Don't you think you should go home before you embarrass yourself any more today?" Angelica laughed loudly as she moved away.

"Women are terrifying," Neville muttered.

Satsuki nodded, dazed.

"She likes Edward enough to throw wine on me in front of all these people?" he wondered.

"You're so naïve, May," Neville said. "That's not why she did it. She's after the Argyle fortune, too."

"Is that really all?" Satsuki prodded.

"Yeah. But you can't go out on the dance floor like that," Neville said, looking at Satsuki's dress in frustration. The wine had stained a large red spot on the white dress. "I'll go get Edward. You stay over there, May."

Satsuki had no choice. Neville pointed him toward the shadow of one of the pillars in the hall where no one would see him, and where there were a few chairs. It was a good spot to wait in. He took one of the available seats and began watching the people passing by.

He saw couples that seemed to get along fine at first glance, but who turned away from each other when they thought no one was looking. Young girls filled with anxiety, unused to parties. Groups of young women sizing up the men in attendance. Young men seeking out and fighting for the attention of beautiful women.

Hidden away in the corner like this, he began to see many human behaviors emerge all around the room. Studying these people might be just as useful for his acting as the trip to the zoo had been. This thought cheered him up a little.

He suddenly caught sight of one young man in particular. The young man was probably in his early 30s and had flaxen hair. He was seated beside the wall, lazily watching the ring of dancers in the center of the hall. No one approached him to talk. He seemed to be here by himself. Satsuki felt a certain affinity with him, since the man seemed to feel no desire to actively participate in the party.

In contrast, Edward was just as wrapped up in chatting with the people around him as ever. He still hadn't noticed Satsuki.

And Satsuki couldn't find Neville in the sea of people. He was suddenly oppressed by the thought

that Neville and Edward had both completely forgotten about him.

Then he appeared.

A smooth voice came from above Satsuki's head. "Are you here alone, miss?"

Raising his face, he saw the flaxen-haired man who had been sitting on the opposite side of the room.

"My escort is around somewhere," he replied hesitantly.

"Your escort is very cruel, then, to just leave a woman like you sitting here." The man's English had a peculiar accent. He was apparently not a native English speaker.

"No, my dress got dirty, so I can't go out with the others." Satsuki pointed at the wine stain.

"That's too bad. Would you like to come out to the balcony with me?" the young man suggested. "We could dance there without worrying about your clothes."

He didn't seem to have any ulterior motives. Rather, he exuded sophistication. He probably just felt sorry for Satsuki who was sitting all alone.

Satsuki wanted to try out the waltzes he had practiced so hard to learn.

"Of course," he accepted.

The man wrapped his white jacket around Satsuki to cover up the stain on his dress, and the two went out onto the balcony.

"Are you cold?" the man asked attentively.

"I'm fine," Satsuki replied. "But how are you without your jacket?"

"The room was too hot, so now I feel just right," the man replied.

The moon was out, but was covered by a fine mist of clouds and couldn't be seen clearly.

"I wonder if they have a word to describe that in English, like they do in Japanese," Satsuki thought idly.

The music from the hall floated out onto the balcony.

"Would you like to dance?" the man asked. Satsuki nodded.

They took each other's hands and began stepping in time to the music. Satsuki had hated dancing in his classes, but now, dancing here like this, it was actually fun. All thanks to Edward.

"Do you live in this country?" the man inquired.

"No, I'm an exchange student from Japan," Satsuki replied demurely.

"I've been to Japan a few times." The man smiled. That made him a rare specimen among all the other foreigners who barely knew where Japan was on a map. "And what are you studying?"

"Theater," Satsuki informed him. "And you?"

"Me?" The man laughed uncomfortably. "I came to England to take in the sights. By the way, miss, what's your name?"

"May," Satsuki said.

"May-san," the man said haltingly.

"You know Japanese?" Satsuki asked in surprise.

"Just simple greetings," the man confessed.
"Konnichiwa," 'konbanwa,' 'arigatou gozaimasu."

Satsuki was struck by a powerful nostalgia at hearing Japanese for the first time in ages.

Really, he had stubbornly chosen to exclude all Japanese from his life in order to learn English better. He remembered all the struggles he had gone through since coming to England, and all the blunders made tears well up in his eyes.

"What's wrong, May-san?" The man stopped dancing and looked into Satsuki's face.

"I'm sorry," Satsuki said, embarrassed. "I was just thinking about Japan."

"May!" Edward yelled, appearing suddenly. He sounded angry. "I've been looking for you. Where were you?"

"Edward..." Satsuki hastily wiped away his tears.

Edward noticed the man beside Satsuki and stopped with a surprised look on his face. "Prince Alexander!"

"Prince?" Satsuki stared at the young man, stunned.

He knew that the crown prince of some country or other had been invited to the party. And of course, he had found the young man to be refined and strangely intriguing, but he never would have imagined his dancing partner was a prince.

He remembered now the rules of etiquette that forbid lower-class people from addressing their superiors. The reason the man had been alone in the hall



wasn't because people were ignoring him, but because his status was so high that they couldn't speak to him.

Edward turned to the crown prince. "Has my fiancée done anything to offend you?"

"You're Lord Argyle's fiancée, May-san?" the crown prince asked Satsuki, ignoring Edward.

"Y-yes." Satsuki nodded bashfully. He felt bad for misleading such a nice person as the crown prince.

"That's too bad. If you ever change your mind, give me a call." The prince winked, suggesting that it was a joke.

"Really, your highness, you must restrain yourself." Edward laughed, but something in his expression remained hard.

The prince smiled graciously. "I'm sorry. Let me give you a piece of advice, though. You shouldn't let such a bewitching fiancée out of your sight."

"I'll remember that," Edward answered darkly.

"E-excuse me!" Satsuki called out to the prince as the man returned to the hall. His face flushed bright red. "I apologize for not knowing who you were."

The prince bowed. "And I apologize for not realizing you were Lord Argyle's fiancée."

Satsuki dismissed the apology, shaking his head fiercely.

"That was really the crown prince?" Satsuki murmured after the young man had left.

Edward looked flabbergasted. "You went with him without knowing that?"

"Well, he looked like a regular person," Satsuki said. "Besides, I was bored."

Edward's face flushed as he glared at Satsuki. "Do you just wander off after whoever comes along when you get bored?"

"Edward!" Satsuki was shocked by the man's anger, which he was seeing for the first time. He fumbled to defend himself. "He leant me his jacket and then we danced together."

Had he done something incredibly wrong? He was uneasy, not understanding the reason for Edward's anger.

"I'll return his highness's jacket," Edward said violently, tearing the jacket from Satsuki's shoulders.

Satsuki sneezed as the chill night air touched his skin. Edward removed his own jacket and put it around Satsuki's shoulders. But that was the only kindness he showed.

"We're going home now," Edward declared bitterly.

On the drive home, Edward still seemed upset and remained staunchly silent the entire time.

Satsuki was starting to get irritated, too. However way he looked at the situation, he couldn't think of anything he had done wrong. It was all Edward's fault. Angelica was the one who had stained his dress so he couldn't dance in front of everyone. And Edward was responsible for not supervising her at the party. And it was Edward who had left him

behind in the first place.

He got that far before an idea struck him. "He's not mad that I came to the party with Neville after he left me behind, is he?"

Thinking about it some more, he realized that Angelica would make a truly faultless fiancée. Maybe Edward had seen her and changed his mind about their plan. If that was the case, Satsuki was just getting in the way.

He didn't know where he stood or how to act.

While Satsuki was lost in his own thoughts, the car arrived at Edward's apartment. The two got into the elevator silently and retired to their separate rooms without saying a word.

As Satsuki was pulling his dress off, he felt a nagging doubt.

"What have I been doing here?"

Of course, he had begun doing all this for the money. But he had suffered through the cross-dressing and waltzing lessons, both of which he hated, by telling himself that he was doing it for Edward. Otherwise, he never would have taken part in this almost criminal plan. He had been able to come this far because he genuinely thought he was helping Edward.

And now all that effort was for nothing.

"If he's going to cancel the contract, I wish he'd just hurry up and do it," he thought.

More money than he could even imagine had been tied up in this plan from the very beginning. And if it was called off, he would have no reason to live in this apartment anymore. His life here had been more

comfortable than he'd expected, but he couldn't be spoiled by Edward's indulgence any longer.

After he had finished changing, he gathered his courage and went to Edward's room.

Satsuki knocked on the door.

"Come in," Edward's voice came back to him violently, without a trace of benevolence.

Satsuki found the courage to open the door.

Edward was lying on his couch, gulping down alcohol from a glass. It was some brown liquid, probably either brandy or straight whiskey.

Satsuki recalled that the man had always drunk only the strongest alcohol when they first met. It wasn't a particularly healthy way to drink.

"Edward, I want to talk to you about something," he began, unsure of how to broach the subject.

Edward scowled. "What is it?"

The man's horrible mood cowed Satsuki, but he wasn't about to retreat now.

"I think you should marry Angelica instead of going through a sham marriage with me," he blurted out.

"You mean you want to quit." A dangerous expression crossed Edward's face.

"No, I don't want to quit," Satsuki said. "I just think you're better off if you marry her."

Edward slid off the couch and stood up silently. "Edward?" Satsuki stammered.

"What do you intend to do after this, Satsuki?" Edward asked in a low voice, hoarse with anger.

"I'll go back to my old life, of course," Satsuki replied.

"Won't you have trouble paying your tuition?" Edward pointed out.

Satsuki shrugged. "I'll just find another job. But I'd hate to bother you more than I already have."

"You found yourself a new golden goose, didn't you?" Edward shouted mockingly.

"Golden goose?" Satsuki was bewildered by this completely unexpected word.

"Don't act as though you don't understand," Edward yelled coldly. "You were getting pretty cozy with Prince Alexander tonight."

"What do you mean 'cozy'?" Satsuki questioned, becoming even more confused.

"He's searching all of Europe for a bride," Edward answered. He pointed a finger at Satsuki. "And he's got his eye on you."

"You can't be serious." Satsuki laughed. What a ridiculous misunderstanding. "Are you saying the crown prince has fallen in love with me?"

"Yes. Am I wrong?" Edward grabbed Satsuki's chin. "With such a pretty face, this work suits you."

Suddenly, Edward kissed him. It was a violent, biting kiss, completely different from the gentle kisses they had exchanged so many times up until now.

"Don't be stupid, Edward!" Satsuki tried to get away from him, but Edward secured both his arms.

Edward shoved him down on the double bed.

Even now, Satsuki had no idea what Edward was going to do to him.

"What are you doing?" His voice was high-pitched with fear. Edward could easily murder him the way things were going.

"I'm treating you the way you deserve," Edward said with a bitter smile.

He tore Satsuki's clothes off. Satsuki began to fight back in earnest, but he only succeeded in ripping the cloth further and losing more buttons. Edward bound his arms over his head with the scraps of ruined clothing.

"Edward!" Satsuki's voice was nearly a scream.

Edward's hands went to Satsuki's belt and began pulling off his jeans. He pulled down the zipper and thrust his hand inside Satsuki's underwear.

"No! Don't touch me!" Satsuki screamed in Japanese. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Edward's fingers wrapped around Satsuki obscenely. Satsuki shuddered at the sensation of being touched by another person for the first time. He lost all power to resist.

Edward had torn Satsuki's underwear off along with his jeans and now lowered his body between Satsuki's bare legs, spread wide on either side of him.

"No...I told you...!" Satsuki yelled.

He felt heat gathering in the lower part of his body. He closed his eyes instinctively, unable to bear the humiliation. His heart was beating quickly. His mind was reeling from the incredible shame he felt.

Edward slipped one hand down toward Satsuki's most secret place and slowly pressed one finger inside.

"No! Don't!" Satsuki's eyes burst open in surprise. His face had flushed bright red in an instant. He couldn't even try to get away since Edward was restraining him. He couldn't move an inch.

Edward's finger continued to squirm inside Satsuki.

Tears rolled down Satsuki's cheeks from the feeling. "No..."

Edward's finger brushed something inside him and his body reacted, overwhelming his resistance.

"Ah!" The languid sigh slipped between his lips.

"Do you like that?" Edward whispered, tracing his tongue along Satsuki's ear.

"Nnn...no..." Satsuki couldn't control his voice as Edward stubbornly continued to press that one spot inside him. He couldn't endure much more of this pleasure, so much greater than any he had felt before. His body continued to ride the feeling, despite his shame. But he was already nearing his limit.

"You can't hold out forever. It's not possible." A ruthless smile came over Edward's perfect face.

"Aaah!" Satsuki screamed shrilly as his back arched. The tension in his body slowly uncoiled and Satsuki released the heat of his body into Edward's hand.

"Didn't your friends at school teach you about the prostate? That's what happens if you stimulate it," Edward said with a philosophical air.

"The...pr..." Satsuki whispered between husky breaths. His mind was paralyzed and he had trouble processing Edward's words. He didn't even have the energy to think.

Edward gently lowered himself onto Satsuki and ran his hand over Satsuki's slick, slightly warm skin.

Closing his eyes tightly, Satsuki weakly turned his head away. His body, still sensitive to the echoes of the earlier sensations, responded to even the gentlest caress.

"Does it hurt, Satsuki?" Edward murmured.

Satsuki shut his eyes tight and bit his lip before nodding. It had been torture, both mentally and physically. He wanted to be released.

Edward let go of his body. Satsuki let out the breath he had been holding.

He heard a rustling sound and knew that Edward had taken his clothes off. Satsuki just barely opened his eyes.

"What are you going to do?" he asked in a thin voice.

Without answering, Edward held Satsuki once more and gently kissed his eyelids. The kisses were tender enough to provoke tears.

"Please...let me go," Satsuki appealed to Edward.

Edward smiled. "What are you saying? Now we're doing it for real."

"What did I do?" Edward thought hazily after it was all over.

Satsuki was lying on the bed with his arms tied over his head.

Edward had raped him.

Until only a few minutes ago, Edward's heart had been consumed by anger and a feeling of betrayal at the hands of the person he loved. It was the first time he had felt such a thing, since he had never loved anyone before.

When Satsuki told him he wanted to give up his role, Edward's anger had been pushed to its breaking point.

But it had all started at the party.

When Angelica appeared, he had given up the idea of taking Satsuki to the party in order to protect him from her. But Neville had been considerate and taken Satsuki to the party himself, foiling Edward's plan. His worries about Angelica had proved well-founded and when he heard what she'd done, he'd rushed to comfort Satsuki.

What he had found instead was Satsuki chatting happily with the crown prince.

He had been deeply hurt. He had felt as if Satsuki was being stolen by another man. He had realized just how precious Satsuki was to him. But it was clear that Satsuki thought nothing of it.

When Satsuki had suggested that he marry Angelica, Edward's feelings had exploded in the worst possible way, seeking release.

All that was left now was regret.

"There are marks," Edward murmured as he unfastened Satsuki's restraints.

Satsuki stared at them as if they belonged to someone else. His body felt heavy and a numb exhaustion ruled his entire being. He had been freed, but he didn't want to move ever again.

Edward left Satsuki for a moment, then came back into the room carrying a towel. He wiped off Satsuki's prone, unresisting body respectfully.

"I'm sorry," Edward said, forcing himself to speak. "I was surprised when you told me you were going to quit. It was childish of me. I won't force you to do anything ever again. Let's forget the contract."

Satsuki finally moved, turning his head to look at Edward. But because the other man was sitting on the edge of the bed, head drooping, Satsuki couldn't see the blond man's expression.

"Are you going to marry Angelica?" he asked, trembling. Despite all his screaming, which he thought would have ruined his voice, the question came out unexpectedly easily.

"No," Edward said in a whisper. "No one would want to be with her."

"Why not?" Satsuki asked.

"Certainly, I desired her once," Edward said. "She's strong. She only cares about her own desires and has never once questioned her way of doing things. But I'm not Angelica. I can't live like her. Wealth and status have never been anything, but a burden to me. Anyway, we should probably call it a day. You can sleep here, if it doesn't bother you."

Satsuki shook his head limply. He sat up slowly. He felt a throbbing pain inside him and grimaced. Edward offered his hand for support and eventually, Satsuki was able to stand up from the bed. As soon as he stood, a warm liquid ran down his thigh and fell to the floor. It was a mixture of his blood and Edward's bodily fluids.

Grief welled up inside Edward at the trace of their violent, heartless intercourse.

"Satsuki..." Edward reached out a hand to touch Satsuki's cheek.

"Don't touch me." Satsuki pushed Edward's hand away.

Edward stopped. "Satsuki?"

"I want to take a shower," Satsuki said coldly.

"All right," Edward whispered.

He put a robe around Satsuki and helped him to the bathroom, then turned the faucet and ran hot water for him.

"Please. Leave me alone," Satsuki requested.

Edward nodded awkwardly.

Satsuki, finally alone, soaked himself in the bathtub, nowhere near full yet, and let water from the shower pour over his head. The hot water stung the cuts on his arms. His eyes began to fill with tears.

He never imagined he would be raped by a man.

What in god's name had gone wrong? Everything in his life with Edward had been a mistake.

He recalled Neville's words. "*I don't want to see you become the plaything of the rich.*"

For Edward, he really was nothing more than a fun way to kill time. But Satsuki had still been fooled into thinking that Edward was a good person.

Thinking back, he realized that he hadn't had a good impression of Edward when they first met. Edward didn't even raise an eyebrow when he'd heard that Brenda had died. To him, she was nothing more than a woman who could be bought.

And so was Satsuki.

He couldn't stop crying. He let his tears flow freely for a while.

Then he made up his mind.

There was nothing to do, but regret forever what had already happened. But what was more important was what would happen next. If he ran home now, tail tucked between his legs, he would never get his self-respect back.

He realized now that he had been blinded by money. That was the first mistake that had started it all.

"I'll continue the contract," Satsuki thought, *"but I won't take any money. I'll give it all back to Edward. Then maybe he'll start to realize that you can't solve everything with money."*

When Satsuki came out of the bathroom, Edward was standing in the middle of the room, pale-faced.

"Satsuki," he began, his voice faltering. But he no longer had the power to move Satsuki's feelings.

"I'm not happy about it, but I need the money," Satsuki said, voice like ice. "So I'll continue working for you. But remember this, Lord Argyle," his voice

became heated as he hissed, "I'll never forgive you as long as I live."

He left for his own room.

Act IV

As You Like It

Two weeks passed by in a blur after the night of the party.

When Satsuki and Edward were alone together, they spoke to each other only as much as absolutely necessary. It was quite fortunate that the apartment was so spacious and had so many different rooms and bathrooms. There was any number of rooms Satsuki could shut himself up in if he didn't want to see Edward.

When Neville came to visit, or when they went out camouflaged on weekends, they were friendly with each other, as if nothing at all had happened.

It was a strange feeling.

They were like actors who hated each other behind the scenes, but played the best of friends on-stage.

One day, Neville came to Edward's apartment as usual.

"I'd like to speed the plan up a bit," Edward said over dinner. "I don't think Angelica will give up easily if things stay the way they are much longer."

"That's true," Neville agreed. "Who knows, by the time your engagement party in May gets here,

Angelica might be standing beside you instead of May. Why not just move the marriage ceremony up? May, your school is going on spring break soon, right?"

Satsuki nodded. "Starting on the 26th."

"And when does the next semester start?" Neville asked.

"April 20th," Satsuki supplied.

"So that's nearly a month," Neville figured out. "We'll think of something right away. Does that work, Edward?"

Edward and Satsuki's eyes met unintentionally. Edward gazed at Satsuki, something clearly weighing on his mind, but he couldn't begin to express what he was thinking. Satsuki also didn't dare say anything. They stared at each other for several seconds.

Edward was the first to look away.

"I think Satsuki would prefer that we wrap this up, too," he finally said.

"Yeah, you must be getting tired of all this, huh, May?" Neville commented.

Satsuki nodded emphatically. If he could clear up all of this mess during spring break, he'd be able to focus all his energy on classes when the next semester started. And he'd be able to get ready to take a break from school to earn money for tuition after that.

"Then if neither party has any objections, the motion to amend the plan is passed!" Neville said cheerfully, never once noticing the change in Edward and Satsuki's dispositions toward each other.

"In exchange for spending my entire spring break here, I'd like to go home for ten days before that.

Is that all right?" Satsuki said suddenly.

Edward looked troubled for a moment.

"Are you unhappy with your life here?" Neville asked naively.

"I'd like to focus on my classes for a bit," Satsuki explained. "There's also going to be a recital."

"Really? What are you doing?" Neville inquired.

"'The Cherry Orchard' by Chekhov. I play the butler," Satsuki said.

"Huh." Neville immediately lost interest at the name of a stuffy old play.

"Can people from outside the school come watch?" Edward asked.

"Yeah, if they sign up in advance. But not many people are interested," Satsuki answered with a bright laugh.

If Neville hadn't been there, he never would have done such a thing.

"We'll let you go for 10 days, so work hard at school," Edward decided. "We'll meet again on the 27th at the Hotel Claridge."

"All right." Satsuki felt a little disappointed that his demand was so easily granted. Edward probably wouldn't have allowed it before.

Satsuki would go back to his room at the boarding house once a week to pick up his mail and check his answering machine, but it had been two months since he'd really come home to stay.

The first thing he did was check his answering machine. It showed 10 calls, but there was only one actual message: "It looks like you're out on the town again. Call me back. A friend of yours called us asking about you."

It was the brusque voice of his older brother.

He checked the time, it was noon in Japan. His father and brother would be at work, so probably only his mother would be home. He made the international call from his room. But he got his house's answering machine. It looked like his mother wasn't home either. He left a brief message and hung up. "It's Satsuki. I'm doing fine. I'll call back."

He had to keep an eye on the phone charges, but if he didn't keep in touch occasionally, he was afraid his family would act like he had been abducted.

Next, he turned to the accumulation of mail.

He was surprised to catch sight of a familiar name from his past on one of the envelopes. It was from Yohei. He hadn't heard from his friend since their fight in the last year of high school. He hurried to open it.

"Dear Satsuki,

We had a reunion for the drama club the other day and Yamada told me that you were in England."

(Yamada had been a mutual friend of theirs.)

"I had been looking forward to seeing you there, so I was surprised. That's just like you. I was a little surprised at how few of the people there were still doing theater, but I was glad to hear you're still

working hard at it. I'd really like to see you again."

Satsuki smiled bitterly. "That's too bad. I can't go back to Japan for a while yet."

Their fight had been entirely his fault. But he was happy to see how little Yohei had changed.

He got out some writing paper to begin a reply.
"Yohei,

"Thanks for your letter. I'm getting some really rare experience here, but I'm paying dearly for it. I met this person at my job and..."

He realized that he was about to write to Yohei about Edward. He crumpled the paper up and threw it in the trash. The feelings Yohei's letter had awoken withered away.

"I wonder what Edward's doing."

An image of the man completely alone in his cavernous apartment floated up in his mind.

"Probably getting drunk, as usual."

He could never forgive Edward for what he had done to him. But it was also true that seeing Edward looking so hopeless afterward had been unbearable.

"He seemed pretty drunk then, too..."

Satsuki shook his head. When he thought about how Edward had hurt him, he knew that no matter how much Edward apologized, he would never forgive the man. But the hatred and pity he felt for the blond welled up inside him, battling each other. He knew there was a part of him that could never hate Edward, and he was astounded by that.

For the first time in ages, Satsuki left for school from his own home. He had to leave earlier than at Edward's apartment, but he'd carelessly woken up like always and had to rush out of the room. Of course, he'd skipped breakfast too. And he felt a little sad that there was no one to say goodbye to.

After he had left, the phone rang in his empty room. It rang for long moments before the answering machine picked up.

"This is Aida. I'm in London right now. I'll call you back later."

It was Yohei. But Satsuki was already long gone.

As the end of the semester drew closer, the classes became much harder as everyone tried to finish the assigned work for each teacher. The students were always wiped out after the end of the semester.

If Satsuki had still been at Edward's apartment, dinner would have appeared without him lifting a finger, but now he had to fend for himself. He didn't want to use the money Edward had given him no matter what.

As he was mulling over what to do, on his way out of school, someone called his name.

"Satsuki!"

His eyes widened at the perfect Japanese pronunciation of his name. He saw Yohei standing beside the school gate.

"No way," he whispered, shocked.

"Why not?" his friend grinned toothily.

"What are you doing here, Yohei?" Satsuki cried out.

"I'm on spring break," Yohei explained. "I've always wanted to take a trip to some foreign country, so I had money saved up. Then I heard you were in London, so... Oh, did you get my letter?"

"Yeah, I saw it yesterday," Satsuki said.

"It took that long to get here?" Yohei mused.

"I haven't been at home lately, so it probably got there earlier," Satsuki explained.

"Oh, so that's why you never picked up all the times that I called," he said. "But I'm glad you read it, anyway."

Satsuki smiled. "I am, too."

"We didn't leave on very good terms," Yohei said hesitantly. "I had no idea what I'd do if you'd just thrown it out without reading it."

"I'm sorry. I acted like such a child." Two years after the fact, Satsuki could finally apologize honestly.

"It's not your fault, Satsuki. I acted like a complete idiot." Yohei's face reddened.

"How long are you staying here, Yohei?" Satsuki asked, changing the subject.

"I'm here on an 11-day package," was the reply. "I arrived last night."

"No way!" Satsuki exclaimed. "That's too bad, though. I still have school, so I can only see you this weekend."

"One weekend is good enough," his friend said. "I really had no idea what I'd do if you didn't want to see me."

"I know! Why don't you stay with me instead of at a hotel?" Satsuki suggested. "Then we can catch up at night."

"But won't that be too much trouble for you?" Yohei asked.

"I bought a sofa bed because I was sure people would come visit from Japan," Satsuki said. "But no one's come yet. I want you to stay with me, Yohei," he insisted.

"Really?" Yohei asked then exclaimed. "Great!"

"But just so you know, my room is really small," Satsuki warned.

"I'm not expecting anything fancy." Yohei laughed happily.

Yohei came to Satsuki's room carrying a massive bag full of instant food.

"You've gotten smart, Yohei," Satsuki said, impressed. When they were in high school, Yohei had been very easygoing and he had had to look out for his friend all the time.

"As long as you've got food, you're happy." Yohei quickly shut his mouth.

"How can you say that?" Satsuki teased.

"I brought it so you wouldn't chase me off after two years," his friend confessed.

"Well, it's a big help," Satsuki said, satisfied. "My food budget is really tight this month."

Yohei looked relieved. "I'm really glad I came

to London. I'm glad we could see each other again." His eyes were damp.

"You're being melodramatic, Yohei," Satsuki remarked.

"But I could never get a hold of you when I called," Yohei said, almost plaintively. "I asked your family about it, and they told me if I came to see you at school I'd probably find you. I'd been waiting for you at the gate since noon."

Satsuki was moved almost to tears by Yohei's words.

Ten days of fun rushed by. Coming home to a friend fluent in Japanese was a balm on Satsuki's spirit.

The last day of the semester arrived. Tomorrow, Yohei would go back to Japan and Satsuki would have to return to Edward. Classes would end that afternoon with their performance of "The Cherry Orchard."

Streams of teachers and students from other classes gathered in the school's studio to watch the recital.

Satsuki used the personality of Edward's butler in Dorsett to help him create the character of the butler for this performance. Visiting Edward's estate had been a good experience for Satsuki after all. He never would have understood what it was like to be a butler without it.

It was Satsuki's cue.

As he stepped out into the spotlight shining on the stage, someone came into the studio late,

chatting with the dean. A slender, tall body. Shining blonde hair. Elegant movements.

Satsuki gulped. He knew it was Edward. But, surprised by the man's sudden appearance, he completely blew his lines.

After the performance and a follow-up meeting, they were free. The semester was over.

Satsuki turned down an invitation from a friend to go drinking, and hurried to the locker room. Tonight was the last night he would spend with Yohei.

As he left the school, he saw Edward standing outside looking depressed.

"Long time no see, Satsuki." The man smiled sadly.

For a moment, Satsuki wasn't sure how to react, but since they were in public he adopted the friendly role.

"It's been a while." He smiled back politely. "What are you doing here, sir?"

He had been wondering that since he'd first spotted Edward in the theater.

"My company supports this school," the man explained. "The dean invited me to come watch the recital."

"I see." Satsuki was embarrassed that he'd thought Edward had come to see him perform.

"I didn't mean to distract you," Edward said with a pathetic look. He must have realized that it was his fault that Satsuki had missed his lines. "May I treat

you to dinner as an apology?"

"I'm sorry, but a friend from Japan is visiting me right now," Satsuki said.

"So bring your friend along," Edward offered.

Satsuki considered this. Thanks to the state of his finances, Yohei was eating only the most humble of cuisines. If they went with Edward, his friend would be able to try much nicer things. It would be a rare opportunity for Yohei, too. And Satsuki had a feeling that if he left Edward by himself, the man would just start drinking.

"All right," he finally agreed. "But I want to make one thing clear, I'm not going back to work for you until tomorrow."

Edward nodded. "Of course."

They arranged to meet at the Hotel Ritz's lobby and Satsuki left.

When Satsuki got home and told Yohei about their dinner with Edward at the Hotel Ritz, his friend was just as exuberant and excited as Satsuki had expected.

"What? With an aristocrat? Awesome!" Yohei exclaimed. "I'm glad I brought a necktie."

"You brought a necktie?" Satsuki asked.

"The guidebook said to," was the explanation. "It said to be prepared for anything and bring along a suit. I wasn't going to at first, but my mom kept nagging me about it. But you can't go to the Hotel Ritz unless you're wearing a tie, can you?"

"Really?" Satsuki asked, horrified.

He thought back to the last time he was there. He couldn't remember ever going except dressed as a woman. But all the men had been wearing ties.

"What's wrong, Satsuki?" Yohei asked.

"I don't have a necktie," Satsuki confessed.

Yohei was surprised. "Really?"

If Satsuki had realized his lapse sooner, he could have found someone to borrow a tie from, but now it was too late. The only thing he had that was nice enough to wear to the Hotel Ritz was a short dress he had brought with him from Edward's apartment to wear tomorrow.

He hesitated.

"Yohei, you can't tell anyone about what you see today," he suddenly said.

Yohei looked confused.

"Absolutely, and I mean *no one*," he insisted. "If you tell anyone, I really will stop being your friend this time."

Yohei was intimidated by Satsuki's expression. He nodded without understanding why he couldn't say anything.

Satsuki took the dress out of the closet. He started to change silently in front of Yohei, who was flushing and going pale by turns.

Yohei's flight would leave early the next morning, so they brought his bags with them to the hotel he had first rented. They left it there then headed to the meeting spot.

Edward was already waiting in the lobby.

"Sorry we're late," Satsuki said, smiling brightly.

Edward seemed truly surprised at how Satsuki was dressed.

"I didn't think you'd come dressed like that voluntarily," he remarked.

"I didn't have anything else that I could wear to a formal hotel like this," Satsuki replied glumly.

"But it looks good on you," Edward said earnestly. "It makes me want to hold you in my arms and kiss you right here, but I suppose I shouldn't in front of your friend?"

"Obviously," Satsuki snapped, slapping down Edward's suggestion.

Yohei seemed very nervous to be standing in front of a blond foreigner in the middle of an expensive restaurant. But Edward spoke to him in his broken Japanese and Yohei answered in awkward English, and the dinner passed in peace.

"Don't forget our meeting tomorrow," Edward whispered quickly as they parted so that Yohei wouldn't understand. He smiled with relief at Satsuki's silent nod.

"I thought you hated having to cross-dress in high school," Yohei said later, as they were strolling along the bank of the Thames.

"I hate it now, too," Satsuki said.

"That was really incredible," Yohei

commented. "I never thought that I'd meet a real nobleman when I came to London."

"There's a lot going on between us," Satsuki muttered.

"He's not your patron, is he?" Yohei eyed Satsuki doubtfully. He was usually somewhat dim, but sometimes he could be really observant.

"Of course not," Satsuki said.

"But he said something about 'kissing' and 'holding' you, didn't he?" his friend insisted.

"You must have misheard," Satsuki said, trying to brush it off. "Didn't he say he was surprised to see me dressed like this, too?"

"I don't understand English at all, I guess," Yohei conceded. "I don't know."

Satsuki's shoulders slumped.

"But there was something about him," Yohei continued.

"What?" Satsuki asked warily.

"He seems to like you a lot, Satsuki," his friend said.

Satsuki tried to laugh the comment off. "What are you saying?"

"Well, I... I liked you a lot, too, so I can tell," Yohei said, stammering.

"What?" Satsuki squeaked.

Yohei faced his friend squarely. "I'm in love with you, Satsuki. I thought it was weird for a man to fall in love with another man, and I swore I'd never say anything, but I can't get it out of my mind."

Satsuki didn't know what to say. "Yohei..."

"I came to London to tell you how I feel." Yohei's face was twisted with pain as he spoke. It had been an impulsive confession.

Satsuki had never noticed how his friend had felt during the entire three years that they were together in high school. The man had been a great friend up until their fight.

"How long have you felt this way?" he asked, moved by his friend's agony.

"Ever since I first met you," was the reply. "You would always talk to me about acting, and it made me so happy."

Satsuki had only talked to Yohei about acting because no one else would listen.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I never noticed."

"Yeah, I thought so," Yohei said. "You don't realize the effect you have on people. I'm the one who's sorry. Sorry for telling you all this weird stuff."

Satsuki shook his head. He had been shocked, but he was happy that Yohei had come all the way to London chasing him.

"But I'm glad I could finally tell you the truth. I was ready for you to reject me outright. But you're a good person, Satsuki." Tears ran down Yohei's face as he smiled.

Again, Satsuki was struck dumb. "Yohei..." "I just have one more thing I want to ask you," Yohei said.

Satsuki smiled. "What is it?"

Yohei looked nervous. "You remember that

parody of Snow White we did in junior year? You played the princess and that senior Kawaguchi played the prince. And for the last scene, he really kissed you, and everyone was talking about it."

Satsuki nodded. "Yeah."

"I was so jealous of Kawaguchi's part," Yohei admitted. "But I put him up to it, since I'd already given up on you."

Satsuki hesitated.

"Sorry, I'm just being stupid," Yohei said suddenly, conscious of Satsuki's reaction.

Satsuki shook his head and lightly pressed his lips to Yohei's.

"This is an affectionate kiss."

He recalled his practice with Edward.

"...Thank you," Yohei whispered.

Satsuki knuckled his friend's head. "It's weird to see you so submissive."

"I guess, maybe," Yohei said.

"No, it is," Satsuki insisted.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Yohei admitted.

They burst out laughing at the same moment.

The next morning, after he'd seen Yohei off at the airport, Satsuki went to the Hotel Claridge.

When he thought about what had happened last night, his feelings were muddled. Yohei's confession had stimulated old memories that Satsuki had sealed away in a corner of his mind. Back then, whenever he had had to dress up as a girl, he always had to kiss

someone. It was only a light touch of the lips, nothing malicious, but he had still hated it. And despite how affectionate the kiss was, he hadn't welcomed kissing Yohei last night, to be honest.

The only exceptions were those kisses he shared with Edward. He still didn't welcome them, but he could stand them. Probably because they had kissed so often that he had become numbed to them.

When he got to the hotel, Edward was already waiting in the lobby.

"I wasn't sure you would come today," the man said with an uncharacteristically vulnerable smile.

"Whyever not?" Satsuki smiled seductively.

"Because your friend from Japan left today. I thought you might have wanted to leave with him," Edward replied.

"Don't be silly. I've got you." Satsuki gave him a kiss on the lips.

Edward's body stiffened for a moment, then he gently pushed Satsuki away.

Satsuki hadn't expected that reaction. Up till now, it had usually been Edward who initiated the kisses. He was sure there was a deeper reason for that. He couldn't help feeling bitter. Did his performance not please Edward?

"Are we doing A today or B?" he asked, collecting himself.

The A routine had the most immediate appeal, since it simply meant spending the day at the hotel after they ate. The B routine involved going out and performing after their meal. B had the advantage of

putting them in the spotlight in front of crowds of people.

"Neither one," Edward stated. "We're going back to my apartment. Neville will be there, too, so I'm not likely to lose control."

Satsuki nodded, startled. It would have been awkward being alone together anyway. If Neville was going to be there, that would be a good distraction.

Neville came out to meet them as they arrived at the apartment. "Hey there, May. The heroine has arrived."

"H-hello." Satsuki was struck by how jealous he felt that Neville had kept dropping by Edward's apartment whenever the man wanted, while Satsuki had been gone.

"Come in, come in," Neville invited as if it really was his home.

Their dinner had been set out on the dining room table.

"First, to the success of our plan." Neville was in extremely high spirits. "May, listen to me. In a week, there's going to be a huge wedding party at the house in Dorsett. Originally, we were going to have the party at a hotel in London, but if word got out there might be trouble, so we changed our minds."

Satsuki nodded. He knew the engagement party had originally been scheduled for May, so their plans had been moved up by a month.

"And when is the wedding?" he inquired.

"Now, don't panic," Neville warned, "but in the middle of the party, you're going to go out and change into your wedding dress. And then the engagement party will transform into the wedding ceremony. And then the day after the party, you leave for your honeymoon."

Satsuki gulped unconsciously. Things were happening faster than he'd expected.

"And then it's over," Neville concluded. "You can go back to your old life and Edward will leave England until the excitement dies down."

"What should I do until the engagement—I mean, until the wedding party?" Satsuki asked.

"We want you to stay here in the apartment until the party. It wouldn't be very much fun if you were to get kidnapped," Edward said without emotion.

"Kidnapped?" Satsuki echoed.

"We're sending out invitations to the party tomorrow," Edward explained further. "We don't know what someone might try and do if they don't like the idea."

Satsuki nodded reluctantly. In 10 days, he would be free from this farce. He felt more conflicted than overjoyed, though. Why was that?

Because it meant leaving Edward forever.

Life at the apartment was nothing, but suffering. When they were alone together, Edward and Satsuki never spoke, even when they ran into each other. Being completely alone in a huge room, speaking

to no one was boring, and Satsuki felt like he was going crazy.

While lying around in bed, his thoughts drifted to Edward. He knew the man was out there somewhere.

In addition to his grand home in London, Edward had an estate with an army of servants and had never in his life had to work. At first, Satsuki had been surprised that someone so blessed by life actually existed. But the man didn't actually seem very happy. His parents had died without ever paying any attention to him, his relatives were trying to steal his fortune, and he was being forced to marry.

"I wonder what Edward will do once this sham marriage is over."

Try as he might, Satsuki couldn't imagine anything, but Edward being swallowed up by his negligent lifestyle again.

There was a knock at the door and Satsuki jumped up.

Edward opened the door and stood by it with a pained expression. "They want to do your dress fitting and makeup test in the living room," he said, telling Satsuki what was needed in as few words as possible.

Satsuki nodded silently. When he went to the living room, he saw a pure white wedding dress along with dozens of other dresses in various bright colors waiting for him. Any girl would have been enraptured at the sight, but Satsuki was only oppressed by the mountain of swirling cloth.

"How many do I need to wear in all?" he asked, horrified.

"One for the engagement party and one wedding dress for the ceremony. So two total," a woman answered, one of the designers contracted on condition of total secrecy.

"If I only need to choose two dresses, why are there so many others?" Satsuki wondered.

"We won't know which one is best until you try them on, will we?" the woman pointed out.

"Oh." Satsuki looked around for an escape, but Edward had disappeared. He was then forced to try on so many dresses that he felt like a doll.

Once they had chosen the dresses, the beauticians arrived. This group manipulated his hair endlessly and slathered makeup on his face, and when it was all over he was exhausted.

"Is this punishment for complaining about being bored?" Satsuki grumbled.

There was a lot to do to prepare for the wedding in 10 days, and it seemed he wouldn't have time to be bored anymore.

Edward was anxious.

Their act would be over in a little more than a week. Before that happened, he wanted to apologize to Satsuki again for what had happened that night. But he couldn't seem to find the right time to say something. And besides, Satsuki was obstinate.

"I'll never forgive you as long as I live."

For the rest of his life, Edward didn't think he would ever forget the pale face that had glared at him then.

In public and with Neville, Satsuki acted friendly, but as soon as they were alone together, his behavior did an about-face and he wouldn't say a single word to him. Edward had begun to understand the depth of Satsuki's anger.

He had hoped that he would have an opportunity to apologize by having Satsuki stay at the apartment, but it had been fruitless.

In order to escape the pain, he ended up reaching for a bottle. Ever since his parents had died it had been like this. Whenever something got to be too much for him, he could only be happy while drinking. But since he'd met Satsuki, he realized he preferred being with the man to being drunk. But now, the pain had returned.

Suddenly the bell rang, announcing a visitor.
"Must be Neville."

Edward wasn't thinking very clearly due to being drunk. When he blindly opened the door, Angelica stood before him.

The doorman posted at the building entrance checked all his visitors. But it was well known that Angelica was Edward's cousin, so the doorman had simply let her in.

"Hello, Edward," Angelica smiled brightly.
"Where might your lovely little fiancée be?"

"I wonder," Edward murmured.

"I'd love to see her," his cousin crooned.

"I doubt she wants to see you," Edward said bluntly.

"Probably not," Angelica agreed. "But it's about time you realized the kind of person she is."

"It's only afternoon," Edward said tiredly. "Can this wait until I'm more awake?"

"How pathetic." Angelica smiled at Edward pityingly. "Anyway, I'd like to talk to your fiancée."

Angelica shoved her way past him and went inside.

"You're a little pushy, cousin," he commented.

Satsuki must have heard Angelica making a commotion. He appeared in the hall, flawlessly dressed as a woman. "Uh, did you want to see me?"

"I came to expose you for what you really are." Angelica pulled a photograph from her purse. "Can you explain this to me, I wonder?" The picture she showed Satsuki was dated March 27th and showed Satsuki leaving a hotel with Yohei.

"That's not the only picture I've got, either." She shoved the other photo at Edward, letting her cousin get a good look. It was a picture of Satsuki and Yohei kissing by the Thames.

Edward felt the blood draining from his face.

"She knows what I really am?" Satsuki went pale.

A photographer had probably followed them after they had eaten with Edward. It had been hard to say goodbye to Yohei that night, and so Satsuki had wound up staying with him at his hotel. The camera had caught it all.

The first photo showed them on the morning that Yohei went to the airport. Satsuki had dressed

like a woman so as to go straight to his meeting with Edward that afternoon.

"These are extremely recent pictures," Angelica said nastily. "I'm sure you have some idea of when they were taken."

Satsuki couldn't say anything.

Angelica exploded. "How dare you try to marry Edward when you have a lover?"

Satsuki's eyes widened involuntarily at Angelica's words. "What?"

"Are you going to keep pretending you don't know what I'm talking about when I have all this proof?" the woman shrieked. "You really are a gold digger."

"She still doesn't know I'm a man!"

"You're wrong. That man is just a friend of mine from high school," Satsuki said, holding back laughter.

"You say that even though I have irrefutable proof that you stayed the night together in a hotel?" Angelica smiled mockingly.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Satsuki burst into laughter. "Even if we'd slept in the same bed together, it wouldn't be what you think it is. He's gay."

"I'm sorry, Yohei." Satsuki apologized to Yohei in his heart, then continued. "Why don't you ask him? I can give you his phone number. Of course, Edward already knows about this."

"What an obvious lie," Angelica scoffed.

Edward, who had been standing as silent as a statue, spoke at last. "She's telling the truth. Cousin,

will you please give this up? You must know that I met him myself. I imagine you're hiding the pictures of the three of us eating together. I'm not such a fool that I'd sit down to eat with my romantic rival."

Angelica seemed to be left speechless at last.

She stared at them each in turn, narrow eyebrows bristling.

"So you won't be canceling the engagement party, then?" she shouted.

"That's correct." Edward nodded charitably.

Angelica turned on her heel and stormed out, slamming the door behind her. Satsuki waited until the sound of Angelica's footsteps had grown distant, then let out a deep breath.

"I thought she'd found out that I'm a man." He smirked and glanced at Edward.

Edward's expression was complex.

"I didn't know you two felt that way about each other," he muttered pointedly as he looked away from Satsuki.

"What?" Satsuki's eyes grew wide with amazement.

"I guess I was mistaken when I thought that that was your first time," Edward said.

Satsuki felt the blood rising to his head. He slapped Edward before he realized what he was doing.

"You're a monster!" he screamed, abandoning Edward, who was still in a daze, to run to his room.

He threw himself on his bed. His tears rushed up and flowed uncontrollably. He had already realized the reason for his tears, but he

didn't want to admit it.

He loved Edward.

Finally, the day of the engagement party and wedding arrived.

They'd arrived at the estate in Dorsett the day before, but Satsuki couldn't sleep a wink in the canopied king-size bed. Ever since the day Angelica had visited them, his relationship with Edward had hit an all-time low. Up until then, Satsuki had been ignoring Edward one-sidedly, but now Edward was clearly refusing to speak to him, too. Refusing to even look at him.

Even Neville seemed to have noticed the nasty state of their relationship, but he didn't dare interfere. No doubt because he knew that after the wedding, the two of them would have no further contact with each other.

The party was to take place in the bar. Its luxury could rival any hotel in London. And thankfully, Angelica was not in attendance.

"It's almost time, May," Neville interrupted Satsuki, who was making the rounds greeting the guests, and the two climbed the stairs together to a small parlor.

"I never thought the day would come," he said as they walked. His eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth twisted into a bitter smile. It was a very unpleasant look.

"Is there something bothering you?" Satsuki asked him.



"I was just thinking about how much Edward hates the aristocratic life, and now he's going to secure not only his position, but his fortune as well." Neville stopped speaking suddenly, then shrugged. "You had to hear this eventually."

"I suppose it isn't a good thing," Satsuki said.

Under Satsuki's earnest gaze, Neville began again, "Maybe not. But when I first met him, the guy was a picture-perfect honor student. Watching him from the sidelines, he looked like the perfect son, following the path his parents had laid out for him without question. But he had some warped ideas. He felt humiliated by the privileges people gave him."

"Humiliated?" Satsuki echoed.

Neville nodded. "That's right. He has a really immature sense of right and wrong. So he tried to figure out how he wanted to live for himself, despite his privilege. That's where it started, when his parents died. A title and massive fortune fell into his lap against his wishes. Although there's the condition of marriage attached to the fortune. But he's suffered his share of blows."

"You're saying his huge fortune is a burden?" Satsuki asked.

Again, Neville nodded. "Yes, I am. Everything's been given to him since he was a child. He's never had to work for anything. Would you call that happiness? I'm from a working class family. Even though I went through college, I can't change my birth. But when I met Edward, he knew that I was happy. I had a ton of things I wanted to do. That's what it means

to be alive. And he doesn't have that."

Neville smiled at the confused look on the Japanese boy's face.

"Neville, are you...?" Satsuki began.

"Don't say another word. It'll make me feel horrible," Neville said, smiling.

Satsuki removed the thin salmon pink dress he'd been wearing and changed into the pure white dress that was set out for him. The four beauticians who had been waiting touched up his makeup, undid his hair, and then put it up again in a different style.

"You look more beautiful than we expected!" one of the women said, thrilled.

The other women spoke without the slightest inhibition.

"How beautiful your black hair and eyes are!"

"I feel like less of a woman next to you."

Satsuki smiled wryly. "If you say so, but I'm a man."

"What a horrible thing to say!" they exclaimed. "Here, have a look at yourself."

Satsuki took a cautious look at himself in the full-length mirror. His back and chest were more exposed than he'd thought they would be, but he'd fixed the padding down well and the lines of his body were beautiful. A diamond-studded choker circled his neck, shining gloriously. He wore the blue diamond ring on his left ring finger.

There was a knock at the door and Edward came in.

"Satsuki, are you almost—" Edward fell silent as soon as he saw his 'bride.'

"Do I look all right?" Satsuki asked Edward nervously.

"Yes. You're beautiful," Edward choked.

The women nodded. "Of course she is. After all, the best in London have put her together!"

"Maybe the best in England!"

The women laughed amongst themselves, but Edward couldn't take his eyes off Satsuki.

The ceremony took place in the garden.

Spring had come early this year. The crocus and narcissus were blooming everywhere, and the trees were dyed in fresh greens. An unimaginable beauty had sprung up from the winter face of the garden.

The guests had been quite surprised when the indoor engagement party suddenly became an outdoor wedding, but everyone looked satisfied with the ceremony in the beautiful garden.

Satsuki's heart was slowly sinking in the face of all these people's happiness. The guilt he felt at deceiving all the people who had come to celebrate was combined with his misery at having to leave Edward in the middle of their fight. The two emotions together completely devastated him.

At last, the ceremony was over, and the two joined hands and returned to the house. The guests went home, but the new 'couple' had to continue deceiving the servants, who still suspected nothing.

"Warmest congratulations, Master Edward," the always expressionless butler said with tears in his eyes. "I'm sure you'll take wonderful care of him, ma'am."

"Ma'am?"

Satsuki felt a wash of conflicting emotions at the change in his title. He couldn't bear to see this kind old man for the last time tomorrow.

"Don't say such tactless things, old man," Edward said, gently chiding the butler.

"Quite right, sir. I've prepared the bedroom your parents used to use. Have a good night." The butler bowed his head, and all the other servants bowed in unison.

Edward and Satsuki joined hands and, smiling at each other, went into the room together.

And as soon as they entered the room, they released each other's hands.

Light snacks had been prepared for them, including champagne, fruit, and sandwiches.

Satsuki quickly realized how hungry he was, having been too nervous to eat during the party.

"I'm kind of hungry. Do you mind if I eat?" He pointed at the food.

"Go ahead," Edward said. "They made it for us to eat, after all. It would make them happy if you ate it."

"Itadakimasu," Satsuki said before beginning to eat in silence.

Edward chuckled at the sight of him.

"What?" Satsuki asked suspiciously.

"You really are happiest when you're eating," was the reply.

Satsuki looked annoyed, but didn't stop eating.

"Oh yes," Edward continued. "Tomorrow, we'll go to Heathrow airport, and split up there. I'll write your check out now." He took a checkbook from a drawer in his desk. Apparently, he'd moved all the essential things to this room earlier. "You did a magnificent job." He wrote out the amount on the check and handed it to Satsuki. "Since we wrapped it up earlier than expected, I added an extra 2,000 pounds. If it's not enough, say so now."

Satsuki looked at the check.

"What will you do after we get to the airport?" he asked.

"I'm thinking of going to Japan," Edward admitted. "I'd like to see the country where you grew up."

"Good idea. The cherry trees are in bloom right now, so it's beautiful enough to rival your garden." A tear fell suddenly from Satsuki's eye.

"Satsuki..." Edward came to Satsuki's side and cupped his face in his hands. "You've experienced some horrible things because of me. How can I apologize?"

Satsuki shook his head, then calmly tore the check up.

"What are you doing?" Edward shouted, eyes wide.

"I don't need all this money. I can't accept this

much anyway. I was definitely in this for the money at first, but it wasn't just that." Satsuki looked Edward straight in the eye. "I did it because I love you. I wanted to help you."

"Satsuki, stop," Edward pleaded. "I won't be able to control myself."

"I don't care." And Satsuki gently pressed his tear-stained lips to Edward's. At last, he'd mastered his heart. He had been attracted to Edward since their first meeting. He had tried not to acknowledge his feelings, but they wouldn't be denied.

"Satsuki..." Edward returned the kiss. It was deep, intense.

"My makeup is running," Satsuki said to cover his embarrassment, pulling away from Edward. "I'm going to take a shower..."

Edward smiled affectionately as he released Satsuki.

After his shower, Satsuki wrapped a bathrobe over his naked body. Thinking about what was about to happen, his heart fluttered like a sparrow. His face was resolute, but it took all the courage he could muster to walk back into the room where Edward was waiting.

Edward, sitting on the bed, smiled at him and reached out for his hand. Nervousness and fear melted away in an instant at the man's gentle smile.

Trembling, Satsuki rested his body against Edward's chest. A rain of gentle kisses brushed Satsuki's lips. A whispered moan escaped him. "Mm..."

Edward murmured between kisses, "Satsuki, open your mouth."

Guessing his intention, Satsuki's cheek flushed. But he parted his lips slightly, allowing Edward inside anyway.

Edward's tongue darted in immediately, and captured Satsuki's own. Their lips pressed heavily together, changing angles again and again. A trail of moisture ran down Satsuki's chin and tears sprang up behind his closed eyelids.

"Th-that's enough..." he panted out.

All the strength fled Satsuki's body under the kisses that seized even his sighs. He ran his hands over Edward's back, pressing into the skin with what strength he had.

"Satsuki..." Edward called out to him.

Satsuki's eyes fluttered open. He saw Edward sitting in front of him, gazing at him adoringly. The last trace of his nervousness disappeared.

Edward lightly brushed Satsuki's lips again, then gently laid him on the bed. Satsuki closed his eyes and accepted Edward's weight on top of him.

Edward ran his hands over every inch of Satsuki's body.

Satsuki felt heat slowly rising in his skin. He bit his lip and choked off a cry.

"Satsuki, let me hear you," Edward whispered, his lips next to Satsuki's ear. He nibbled Satsuki's earlobe.

Satsuki's head rolled limply to one side.

Edward laughed softly at the motion. His



lips slid slowly down Satsuki's neck and caressed the hollow of the collarbone. And there, he laid the mark of his possession.

As his chest was being caressed by tongue and hand, Satsuki let out an involuntary cry. His body had grown sensitive and he responded immediately. He tried to push Edward away with powerless arms.

Edward easily stopped his resistance and trailed his lips further down Satsuki's body.

Satsuki's manhood was filled with heat and reared up under Edward's touch. Edward wrapped both his hands around it and Satsuki's entire body shuddered.

"Oh!" Smiling deviously at Satsuki's response, Edward took Satsuki into his mouth. "No!"

A blinding pleasure tortured Satsuki. Heat coursed through his entire body. A blush of embarrassment tinged his skin. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to let the feeling wash past him, but the soft, wet warmth of Edward's mouth held him with a yielding firmness that sent waves of sensation over him again and again.

"No...let me go...Ed..."

But Edward ignored his pleas. Tears welled up, unbidden, in Satsuki's eyes and coursed down his cheeks.

Edward's tongue slowly licked him, tracing his shape. Edward gave a light kiss to the tip.

"Mm...ngg..." Satsuki mewled again, his senses seized by the caresses. His body was ruled only

by the pleasure he felt. He tried again to push Edward off of him, but the hand he pressed onto Edward's head was so weak he could only grab a handful of hair. "Mm...no..." He looked at Edward, eyes wet with passion. Strength came into his fingers, tangled in Edward's hair. He was close.

Edward gazed up at him, watching, and sucked harder.

"Mm!" Satsuki finally cried out.

Edward accepted all of Satsuki's excitement.

Satsuki's breath came quickly, his chest rising and falling. His tears still hadn't stopped. He had never felt such pleasure in his entire life. He sank into the bed, exhausted. Warmth smoldered still inside him.

"Satsuki..."

Hearing his name, Satsuki opened his eyes, grown heavy with the tears. He could barely focus, but he made out the image of Edward watching him with concern.

Edward laid a hand on Satsuki's cheek and gently stroked it. His lips drew close to Satsuki's eyes and kissed away the tears there. His tenderness comforted Satsuki.

"Satsuki, let go," he murmured.

Satsuki, captivated by the kisses, tensed at these words.

"It's all right," Edward said soothingly, pecking him with kisses.

Slowly, the tension left Satsuki's body.

Dropping kisses like rain on his face, Edward reached a finger inside Satsuki.

"Ah!" Satsuki screamed.

Memories and sensations from the first time reawakened inside him, and Satsuki's limbs convulsed. He twisted his body and tried to pull away.

Edward gently stopped him. He slowly added one finger, then another, allowing Satsuki to adjust each time, to accept more inside his body.

His body trembling slightly, Satsuki endured the feeling. Tears began to come back to his eyes.

Edward kissed Satsuki's eyelids to reassure him. "This was the spot, right?" He pressed a spot inside Satsuki with his fingers—the prostate.

Satsuki knew it now; he had looked it up after the first time.

"No!" Satsuki's back arched as he shouted. A pleasure greater than ever took control of his body. It had only been one time, but Edward had remembered Satsuki's body perfectly. "No...stop..." he gasped.

He was losing himself. He feared the pleasure. He couldn't hold on to his reason.

But Edward ignored his cries and patiently attacked the spot inside him.

Moment by moment, Satsuki's manhood, exhausted and limp, swelled with heat again.

Satsuki sought something to support his waning strength and wrapped his arms tightly around Edward's body.

Deciding that he had loosened Satsuki enough inside, Edward carefully removed his fingers. A tiny cry escaped Satsuki's lips at the feeling.

"Satsuki..."

Satsuki turned his eyes toward the voice.

Edward's face was coming closer. Edward pressed a deep kiss onto his lips. Edward's tongue chased and caught Satsuki's own. It was childish, but Satsuki tried to respond to it. Then...

"Nng!"

His scream disappeared inside Edward's mouth.

A feeling of heaviness completely unlike the other pushed its way inside Satsuki. Tears flowed from him at the sense of pressure and the pain. His mouth was occupied, he couldn't escape the sensation by screaming. The uncontrollable heat only built up inside him. He dug his nails into the back that supported him. If Edward had brought him this pain, only he could alleviate it.

Satsuki squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

Even after Edward had buried himself entirely inside Satsuki, they didn't move for a while.

At last, Edward slowly released Satsuki's lips.

"Mmph..." Satsuki gulped. His face was twisted with pain. But even so, he didn't push Edward away.

Edward said his name tenderly, "Satsuki, Satsuki." He kissed away the tears running down Satsuki's face, pressing his lips again and again to Satsuki's eyes. "Let go."

Satsuki nodded. Edward slowly began to move.

"Ow...ah!" Satsuki's voice was soaked with pain. Edward gently touched Satsuki's member, now weak, and gripped it tensely. Satsuki's body leapt at the

renewed stimulation, dissolving his consciousness.

Edward discovered Satsuki's weak spots with precision. Stimulating him front and back at the same time, he heard something else beginning to color Satsuki's voice.

Satsuki was half unconscious as the pleasure rippled through his body. A sultry noise escaped his partly open lips. "Ah, ah...Nnn..."

His back arched. Probed deep inside and at last surpassing his limit, he released himself.

Edward also unleashed his emotions into Satsuki.

Satsuki's eyes shot open. He slowly began to close them again, and he released his hold on consciousness.

The next morning, Satsuki was awakened at dawn by the loud chorus of birds.

Edward lay still beside him, breathing peacefully in his sleep, still completely naked. He must have been used to the birds, since he'd lived here so much longer.

Satsuki's body was still heavy with the sweet fatigue of the night before and his heart was light.

It was only beginning to grow light outside.

"We still have half a day together."

According to the contract they had agreed to with Neville, he and Edward would part at Heathrow airport and then be complete strangers for the rest of their lives.

"I'm glad I told him how I feel before we parted forever."

Satsuki burrowed into the bed again, pressing his body against Edward's, and closed his eyes.

At first, Edward thought he was still dreaming. When he woke up, Satsuki was asleep in his arms. The person he loved was sleeping in his arms. It was a dream he'd had often.

He gently touched Satsuki's cheek. His fingers felt the warmth of living skin.

"Mm...mm?" Satsuki rolled over.

The gentle spring sunlight played over the mark Edward had feverishly traced down Satsuki's neck to his collarbone and on his chest.

"It wasn't a dream," Edward murmured. A smile spilled from his face, unbidden.

Satsuki was an amazing boy. Edward had been bewitched by him ever since their first meeting at the pub in the bad part of London. He had been captivated, and oppressed by emotions he was unfamiliar with. And as his emotions had grown more powerful, he had committed that horrible violation. But Satsuki had forgiven him. More than that, he had offered himself to Edward again.

Edward was enveloped by the feeling of being loved, which he had never known before. It was the feeling he had dreamed of ever since his childhood.

When Satsuki woke up again, his eyes met Edward's, who was gazing at his face.

"You should have woken me up, too, if you were already awake," Satsuki said, turning a little red with sudden shyness.

"I couldn't stop looking at you," Edward admitted. "You looked so happy asleep."

"I actually woke up earlier," Satsuki said. "But you were completely oblivious, despite all the noise the birds were making."

All Edward could do was laugh.

"But if we don't get up soon, someone will come," Satsuki added.

"No one would do something so tactless on the morning after our wedding." Edward rolled on top of Satsuki and unleashed a flurry of kisses on him.

"I'm hungry, anyway," Satsuki said.

He blushed up to his eyebrows at what Edward whispered in his ear. "You'll have plenty to eat soon enough. But right now I have a better idea."

After they had had a private brunch in the sunroom, the two loaded their bags in the car and set off for Heathrow airport.

After leaving the estate, Satsuki said almost nothing.

Edward didn't think much of it, attributing it to fatigue from last night and this morning. His own head was full of his own happiness. As they approached the airport, he stole a look at Satsuki, sitting beside him in

the passenger seat, and saw that Satsuki's eyes were bright red. The man looked as if he was about to cry.

"Satsuki?" Edward cried in concern. "What's wrong?"

"Did I do something wrong?" Even after all this time, Edward didn't understand Satsuki's feelings.

"We're really going to leave each other after all," Satsuki said, a tear falling from his eye.

"What?" At first Edward didn't understand what Satsuki meant at all. He stared uncomprehending at Satsuki, terrified. He thought he'd proven his love for the other man last night and this morning. He couldn't understand why Satsuki was talking about parting. He was nearly in a panic.

Then he suddenly remembered the photos Angelica had shown them. The ones showing Satsuki kissing his friend.

"Satsuki, can you really not give up your friend Yohei?" Without realizing it, his voice became dangerous.

"Why would you bring Yohei up at a time like this?" Satsuki looked at Edward, blinking the tears from his eyes.

"Well, if not him, then why do you think we need to part?" Edward asked. "All I could think of was that you couldn't forget your old boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Satsuki raised his eyebrows. "Edward, you suspected me and Yohei?"

He became clearly angry.

"No. I mean..." Edward grew incoherent in the face of Satsuki's fury. "I couldn't think of anything else

that would be upsetting you, Satsuki."

"But you signed the contract, too, didn't you?" Satsuki shouted. "If we break the contract, you pay a penalty, and if not, we leave each other at the airport and never see each other again!"

"Isn't it obvious that the contract is over?" Edward said.

Another tear fell from Satsuki's eyes. "You never said anything about it, so I just assumed..."

"I'm sorry," Edward apologized. "I never say the most important things."

Satsuki shook his head. "It's okay. I get it now."

"No, listen to me, Satsuki. It's important." Edward's voice conveyed his resolve.

Satsuki wiped away his tears and looked at him. "What?"

"I'm giving up my fortune," Edward announced.

Satsuki's eyes widened.

Edward continued, "I'm sure that'll shut my annoying relatives up. And in exchange, I'll be free. Will you stay with me even if I have nothing, Satsuki?"

Satsuki laughed. "I can't imagine you without money."

He had the smile of an angel, and never ceased to charm Edward.

"Well, will you?" Edward prompted.

Satsuki slowly nodded.

Edward beamed. They continued on to the airport, and to a lifetime spent together.

Afterword

Hello, I'm the author, Kyoko Akitsu.

Time has flown by, and now at last, I've published a new book, set in England this time around. I have some depressing memories of that place.

As soon as I landed in London for the first time, I ran out, map in hand, to see a musical. I left the theater totally worked up, and it was only a little while later that I noticed my map was missing...and I'd written the address of my hotel on the map so I wouldn't have to remember it...and so I didn't. For the rest of my life, I'll never forget the terror I felt right then, when I thought I would have to wander around London without knowing where I was or where I was trying to go. One bright spot was that I remembered the name of the hotel and that it was inside London. Thank goodness for London taxicabs! One took me straight to the hotel when all I could tell him was the name. I probably wouldn't have gotten out of that in one piece in any other country. England truly is a country of gentlemen.

Anyway, I started out planning to write a sequel to my last book. But after a meeting with my manager, we proved that we're both romantics. The



idea grew and grew, and before I knew it, I wound up writing this story instead. It's a whole new experience writing for pleasure. In addition to the help that O gave me for writing about beautiful people, Y gave me some excellent advice in writing sexy scenes. O was writing a story about six beautiful boys at the time. She's just so good at describing beautiful people (or at least, much better than me). And Y is a powerhouse in yaoi publishing, with a million books sold (apparently she's too intimidated by the numbers to keep counting her profits). I wonder what the next book will be like. To make sure I deliver the quality you expect, I'll be taking a vacation...for training! (Or maybe I'll just make my getaway...)

Finally, a big thank you to Ms. Tooko Miyagi for her illustrations! I really lucked out!

And to all the readers, I hope that this book brightens up your day, even just a little bit.

Hopefully, we'll see each other again soon!

February 2001

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